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I have been preoccupied of late with the notion of honouring your legacy in creative industries. It seems to come up more and more often, quite clearly in the case of our cover game this issue, *Star Wars: Battlefront*, but also with each reboot and re-imagining that is cooked up by publishers looking to keep valuable IPs alive.

With films I subscribe to the thinking that just because something is being remade or rebooted doesn't mean that it harms in any way what came before. 'They're not going to come into your house and burn your Blu-ray collection', as the defence goes, but are games a little different?

For a start the technology of how a film is viewed, the quality of the image and so on hasn't changed all that much in the last 30 years, but fundamentally, a *Mario* game is a significantly different experience now than it was at its conception. The movie experience is passive and therefore timeless, games are not. Technology evolves, gameplay matures.

So when a developer like Team Ninja takes a stab at *Devil May Cry*, I look on with interest. The classic isn't going anywhere, but then again, it's ageing by the second. It's a horrible catch-22 for developers, to be chastised by doing the same old thing or ostracised for attempting something new. I don't envy the challenge, but I respect those who strive to be different, if only just to try.

Jon Gordon

Jonathan Gordon
EDITOR




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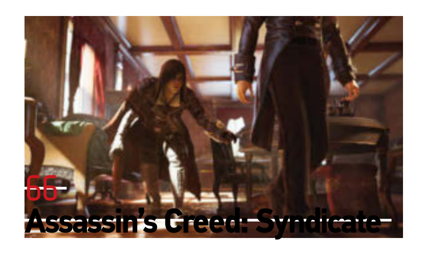
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(PAY £0.99 TO UNLOCK A WITTY PUN!)

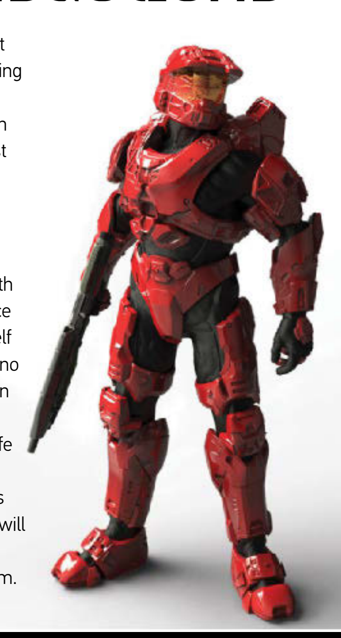
The necessary evil of microtransactions

→ A dirtier word than 'DLC' and 'free-to-play' put together, the microtransaction now permeates even games that cost £40+. We speak to Freestyle Games' Jamie Jackson about whether there's a good side to the business model…

If a game comes with a full game's worth of content on-disc, and you pay £40 for it, are you willing to put *any* more money at all into the product? A lot of people aren't – they've made their investment and now they want to enjoy the service they've paid for. But as the barrier between physical games and digital 'services' begins to blur, what's the solution to spending money upfront?

"When you go through a design process, you take everything in from the world around you and consider it as an option," explains Jamie Jackson – creative director of *Guitar Hero Live* and Freestyle Games co-founder – when we ask him how his studio's take on this ever-increasing issue for the industry. "Whilst we didn't necessarily go down the Season Pass route, we *did* think about the various types of *Guitar Hero* player – so that's those that will play the song on the hardest difficulty and are only concerned with beating the crap out of everybody, and the more casual players that just want to get a bunch of mates, beer and pizza in and play for just a night."

Jackson explained to us that it was that second group that inspired the game's 24 hour pass – you buy it and you can play as much of the *GHTV* service as you want, with no caps. *GHTV*, it's worth noting, is a service kind of separate from *Guitar Hero Live* itself – what you get on-disc can be played with no limitations, locally, and is a full game. When you migrate to *GHTV*, you can play along with curated playlists, against other real-life people, whilst enjoying music streamed online and *not* stored to your device. This is totally free… fuelled by the money players will be spending on unlock tokens to get to the songs they want as soon as they want them.



DATA STREAM → EA HAS REVEALED THAT 9 MILLION PEOPLE TOOK PART IN ITS BATTLEFRONT BETA

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"I guess in a way our pay system was inspired by mobile… well, not just that, but how *everything* is changing," Jackson explains. "[Services like] Netflix and Spotify – all these different platforms are changing how we consume things. Mobile, in the past five years, has completely changed the face of games – if I thought about a free game five years ago I'd have said 'Well, how am I going to eat if everyone has my game for free?' It's changed, though, now – some 15/16 year old kids would find the concept of paying for a game as alien as having a free game was to me!"

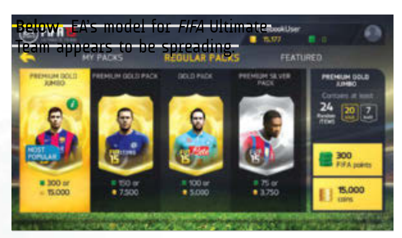
"The thing with *DJ Hero* was that you had to unlock certain sets – but we always felt that… well, people have such a diverse taste in music: if you're making a heavy metal fan play through a soft rock set to get to what they want to play, they get really frustrated," Jackson explains. "They just get to what they want to get to. Not [locking] anything away was driven by that idea. If you want, you can just jump straight in and play what you want.

"As a developer – especially as a console developer – you have to think about *everything* you can do to provide a longer tail to your game," Jackson continues. "I think gamers expect more nowadays: every big game out there has additional content, and people expect that. We wanted to do that, and *GHTV* means we don't have to build a disc to deliver it. I think 80 to 90 per cent of consoles are connected nowadays, versus less than 40 per cent last generation."

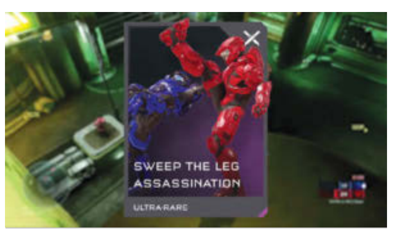
> As a developer you have to think about everything you can do to provide a longer tail to your game

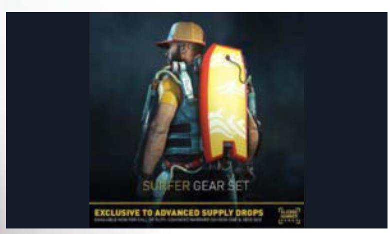
SO THE SOLUTION – at least for Freestyle Games – is to introduce small, non-essential microtransactions into their games to buffer profit margins. Boxed copies might be good for profit spikes around Christmas, but less intrusive (and less offensive) models like the *Guitar Hero Live* one give players control over how – and what – they consume. If you want to spend a load of time on *GHTV* (playing songs that aren't on the disc) you can easily *earn* that time in the main game by unlocking credits and cash as you can by buying them. In a way, it creates a sense of progression and reward that offline-only games used to create through keeping content locked away.

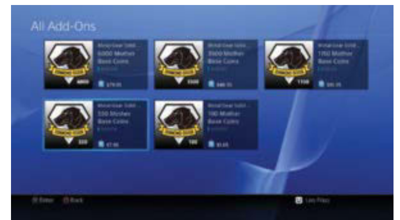
As we travel further into this digital generation, we're very much expecting this to become the norm for games that want to live on *as a platform*. If a game's launching with dedicated servers, multiplayer modes, moderation, cloud power and all that new-fangled tech they require to stay alive, we don't mind having the option of supporting them. But we *will* mind if that kind of support becomes compulsory. For now, though, we're in good hands.



Below: EA's model for *FIFA* Ultimate Team appears to be spreading







Who's In & Who's Out

We're seeing more triple-A games implement microtransactions into their service, but some developers are taking a stand against them…





(HOUSE OF PAIN)

Who Needs Silent Hills, Anyway?

→ How an independent British studio is filling the gap left by the cancelled Hideo Kojima/Guillermo del Toro game… Chris Kesler (Lilith Ltd's founder) talks about Allison Road's journey

Was it a love of *P.T* and *Silent Hills* that lead to the development of the game *Allison Road*?
Haha, no actually – but a lot of press and fans have made this connection. I was actually toying with the idea of *Allison Road* for quite a while… My background is in movies and I've been working in film post-production for quite a while because I've had ideas for games, but I could never really get them off the ground. I started working on *Allison Road* on my own for about six months, and then all of a sudden *Silent Hills* got cancelled and the press picked *Allison Road* up as a spiritual successor, almost! [laughs] It was really incredible, but it wasn't a comparison that we actively encouraged or anything – it just kind of happened!

We're incredibly lucky, really – well I say lucky… Hideo Kojima, Guillermo del Toro, Norman Reedus and Masahiro Ito would have made a totally awesome game so I *am* upset that won't be going ahead.

***Allison Road*'s setting is very similar to that of *P.T*, but *Silent Hills* looked like it would be a lot different…**
P.T was great – I had a great time with it. But you know at the end when you walk into the road and you see Norman Reedus and everything? Kojima said after people had discovered that trailer bit that FOX Engine was built for open worlds, and that *Silent Hills* was going to be something totally different to *P.T.* So I almost had the impression that *Silent Hills* was going to be more like *Silent Hill 2* – where the town is open for you to walk around.



Above Chris Kesler is the founder of Lilith and the writer of *Allison Road.*



With *SOMA* and *Alien: Isolation*, we're seeing a shift to the more implicit kind of horror. Do you think horror games will grow to a similar maturity in the way that the genre did within films, and end up with this scope with everything from gore/body to more cerebral horror?
We are definitely trying [to go more cerebral] with *Allison Road*. You can't just take people and scare the crap out of them, like, *non-stop* you know? That just doesn't work: if it's jump-scare-based you come to expect them – 'Okay, now it's coming' all the time. It's exhausting, you just stop caring. So for us, we're going into a real narrative or story that you make the player *want* to follow.

We aren't interested in making a 'terror' game – where you're *just* terrifying your audience – we really want to scare them, you know?

From your background in cinema, are you more concerned with making the player a lens through which to see this world, or do you want to use the first-person perspective to create more empathy?
Personally, one of my favourite games ever is *The Last Of Us*: it's structured like a movie in terms of story and how it tells you things, but it's also got a lot of interactivity. Because the writers put such a lot of emphasis on characters, you end up caring much more about their arcs than about anything else… I don't think I know one person who didn't give a crap about these guys when the ending came around, you know? Everybody cared. That's because Naughty Dog took lessons from gaming and movies and applied it to their story.

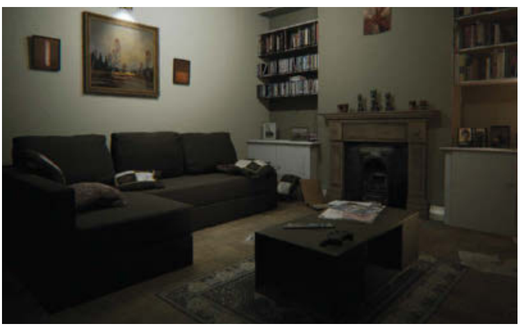
That's very much what we want to do [at Lilith]. We want to take the most impressive, most useful stuff from horror games and horror films and use them together. But where we've got to be careful is in VR – we want to make the game viable for that platform, so we can't rely too much on cutscenes, so we'll solve those moments with real-time events instead.

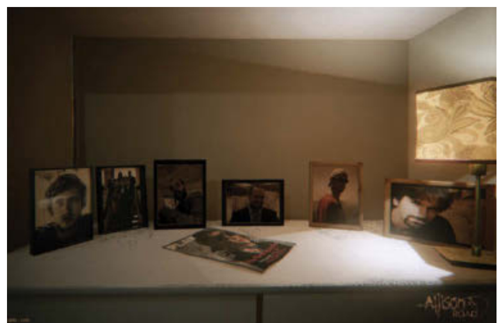


WARNER BROS' MORTAL KOMBAT AND BATMAN: ARKHAM KNIGHT HAVE SOLD OVER 5 MILLION COPIES EACH



Inset *P.T.* proved that a horror game set in an intimate space can work – it's up to *Allison Road* to deliver on the promise.





PSYCHOLOGICAL HORROR

■ IN GAMES, we tend to get gore, jump scares or a tingling sense of dread in our games. *Allison Road* is more concerned with getting in your head and undoing you from the inside. It's psychological horror in a way that gaming has yet to really experiment with… "The objective of *Allison Road* is to survive, you know? There's no combat – this isn't *Silent Hill* or *Dead Space*. The reason we decided to set this in a British house is to make it super-realistic and grounded in reality. When you stop playing, you'll still feel affected by it. Science-fiction games – *Alien: Isolation*, for example – are great, but when you put the pad down, you know you're safe. We want to make you feel a little nervous, a little uneasy."

> I found out there are so many ways you can end a person's life and mutilate the body

Allison Road *– like* P.T *before it – trades on its photorealistic presentation. What inspired this direction and do you think it adds to the horror experience?*

One of the reasons I wanted *Allison Road* to be photorealistic is, well, because of my background in film, where everything has to be as realistic as possible, I've come to love looking at real things. Real, pretty things with all their detail… whether that [level of photorealism] is necessary for *Allison Road*, though, I don't know… *Gone Home* kind of did that: it doesn't look photoreal, but it's such a beautiful game that you don't even notice .

Between *Gone Home* and *Everybody's Gone To The Rapture*, could you say that these 'walking simulators' have changed the way you've approached *Allison Road*?

It's interesting, you know, because as much as I enjoyed *Rapture* – looking around and exploring this beautiful world – I had a real hard time piecing the story together because I'm not very good with names [laughs]. I don't want to make *Allison Road* as slow-paced as that, though. There needs to be a good flow to the game – more like *Gone Home*, I think: you get a good rhythm to the discoveries you make. In our game, though, you have an actual threat on your tail, too – so of course that's going to affect how we end up approaching development.

Where did the ideas for the monsters come from?

For us, there are two ways we could have gone with this: we could have gone for the nightmare creatures that have crazy deformations and loads of heads, grotesque wounds and god knows what, or we could have kept it more based in reality.

If you were a killer, right, you'd have these images of what happened, what you did, in your head… If you were in a house that had murders and things happen in it, would these spirits manifest as crazy and weird? No. They'd be more based in reality. So I did a ton of research into how people have been killed, especially looking at the absolutely crazy ways [that] Mexican drug cartels dispatch people…

Well, that's some pretty intense research going on! Did that affect you in any ways that you didn't expect?

[Laughs] Yeah, for three weeks I was doing work on just gore and murder and death, and I'd find myself on all these weird forensic websites and I had nightmares every night for two weeks… I'm not really into this sort of thing, but for research I had to go deep, you know? I found out there are so many ways you can end a person's life and mutilate the body. That definitely took me some getting used to.

Below The level design promises to be very interesting… even if it is absolutely terrifying.





MIRROR'S EDGE COMPOSER SOLAR FIELDS IS RETURNING FOR THE NEW DICE PARKOUR SIMULATOR, CATALYST



KONGETSU

And you thought Wii U was dead in Europe…

"You see that big X in the sky, Microsoft? It's time to pull out of Japan – you're needed elsewhere"

The sad tale of Xbox in Japan

I always love looking at Japanese sales figures via the Media Create charts – partially because it's really nice to see actual candid performance data when the Western market is generally so secretive with such information and partly because I can't help but laugh at the Xbox One's absolutely pitiful performance. It's actually quite a good window into how publishers spin stats – Microsoft would likely boast that, at the time of writing this piece, Xbox One sales were up 10 per cent week-on-week. But the part it would probably be less inclined to tell you would be that this seemingly quite impressive figure constituted an extra 21 units sold, taking the total to 224 for the week. For reference on just how bad that really is, Sony shifted 670 Vita TVs (not to mention a whopping 14,000 Vitas) in the same time frame, while PS4 bossed it with over 30,000 consoles sold – over half of the Xbox One's total sales in Japan since launch. Seriously, does Microsoft *really* think this is a salvageable situation?

Let's take a look at what's in store in the coming months, shall we? *Halo 5* will likely do okay in its first week before vanishing, just like its predecessors – *Halo 4* actually managed to snag a top-three slot in its first week before crashing out of the top 40 the next, while *The Master Chief Collection* barely managed to graze the top 20 in week one then immediately returned to cryostasis. Aside from that… well, there's simply nothing on the calendar that isn't clearly Western-focused and while that might sit well with existing owners (it's not like these people bought an Xbox One for Japanese games, after all), it's not going to shift any more consoles in the East.

No, the only game in any danger of putting a spike in that embarrassingly low sales chart is *Scalebound* – a Platinum-developed console exclusive that looks to blend *Devil May Cry* with *How To Train Your Dragon*. At best, though, I can see this bumping console sales into four figures for a week or two before dropping off (unless the game turns out *incredible*, perhaps), but then what? PS4 is getting *Dragon Quest*, *Persona* and *Yakuza* games and pretty much every game I can see being potentially interesting to the Japanese market is on multiple consoles. Without wanting to descend into playground bullshit, it's not even like MS has power on its side – had Xbox One been a clear frontrunner in terms of power, it might have made a difference, or perhaps if it hadn't been the size of Belgium.

You see that big X in the sky, Microsoft? It's time to pull out of Japan – you're needed elsewhere and while a third attempt at the Eastern market was a bold move, it backfired once again. According to Meatloaf, two outta three ain't bad, but I'm pretty sure the man himself would tell you that zero outta three ain't good at all. In fact, it's awful. Try again when you've got an exclusive *Monster Hunter* game, maybe…



Luke Albigés is Editor of **Play** magazine and is pretty sure he could release a console in Japan to outsell the Xbox One

Import Watch

Project X Zone 2: Brave New World

Who would have ever thought that the crossover of crossovers would get a sequel? Well, the fact that it features characters from some of the biggest (and some of the most obscure, for that matter) games from Bandai Namco, Capcom, Sega and Nintendo allows the SRPG to punch well above its weight; flashy visuals and insane team attacks between unlikely partners giving fans of series from *Virtua Fighter* to *Mega Man* (by way of *Resonance Of Fate*) a chance to see their favourite characters in a whole new light.





FANS HAVE MADE A TRIBUTE TO METAL GEAR SOLID WITH UNREAL ENGINE 4 CALLED OUTER HEAVEN

"Sometimes it feels like the best business model for a start-up is to make just enough game to get onto Early Access"

Is this the Indiepocalypse?

Right, let's do it. Let's talk about the Indiepocalypse; the is it/isn't it crash of game revenue on Steam. A few months back I wrote about how the closure of Tale of Tales following *Sunset*'s poor sales could be seen as a tragic blip. Oops. Apparently I jinxed it, because according to SteamSpy, revenue is flat-lining across the board, and in about six month's time, regional indie get-togethers will be like something out of *The Road*.

Is it true? Well, the jury is still out, but it's definitely scary. Sometimes it feels like the best business model for a start-up is to make just enough game to get onto Early Access and never plan on finishing the thing. It's cheaper and easier to make the first quarter of a game than the last 10%, and you can make a decent chunk of money with less risk doing that than committing to the full thing. Not over and over, people aren't that dumb but... when you combine this with the continued race to the bottom in terms of how much people are prepared to pay for media, you've got a pretty toxic combination.

You still get people saying on forums that they value game length over game quality; you can now get a refund because you just didn't like something, not because there's actually anything wrong with it (a terrifying picture of a pathologically risk-averse culture if I ever saw one); the sheer volume of games hitting the market has never been higher.

Here are some economics. Let's assume you are making a relatively small game, using a designer, coder and artist. Forget the producer, writer, composer, actors, musicians and marketers and assume you are doing literally everything in-house. A twelve-month development cycle is horribly short, but let's go for that, and assume a very minimal set of studio costs, and budget this on the average wages for those positions. You certainly won't get any change out of £120,000 - and that's being extremely conservative (good luck getting change out of £250,000 if you are an established studio). You are going to lose 30 per cent to the distributor, probably another five per cent licensing (assuming no middleware), and let's chop off another 20 per cent for tax and costs. Assume you sell the thing for $9.99 on Steam. That means you are taking home about $4.50, or £3 per unit. That means to break even, you need to sell 40,000 units.

Personally, I'm not a fan of SteamSpy - whilst I'm all for consumer rights, I also believe developers have rights and SteamSpy tramples on them completely. But just this once, go take a look at average units sold: you'll begin to understand why so many small businesses are concerned right now. What's going to happen is small studios will be driven back to publishers as the risks of going it alone are too high, and you can guarantee the screws will begin to turn, innovation will ramp back, diversity will drop, and the quality bar of games will fall.

It's somewhat cyclical – we've been through this process at least twice in the last couple of decades, but it's always depressing. And it's up to us as gamers, as consumers, to arrest the process. And the solution is pretty simple – treat games and developers with the respect they deserve, understand the complexity and skill required to make a game, and value them accordingly. Don't hold out for bundles, don't get a refund because you made a mistake or because (shock horror!) you encountered something not absolutely to your tastes, and don't expect developers to shoulder all of the risk for you. Because players will suffer the Indiepocalypse if it happens as much as developers and studios.

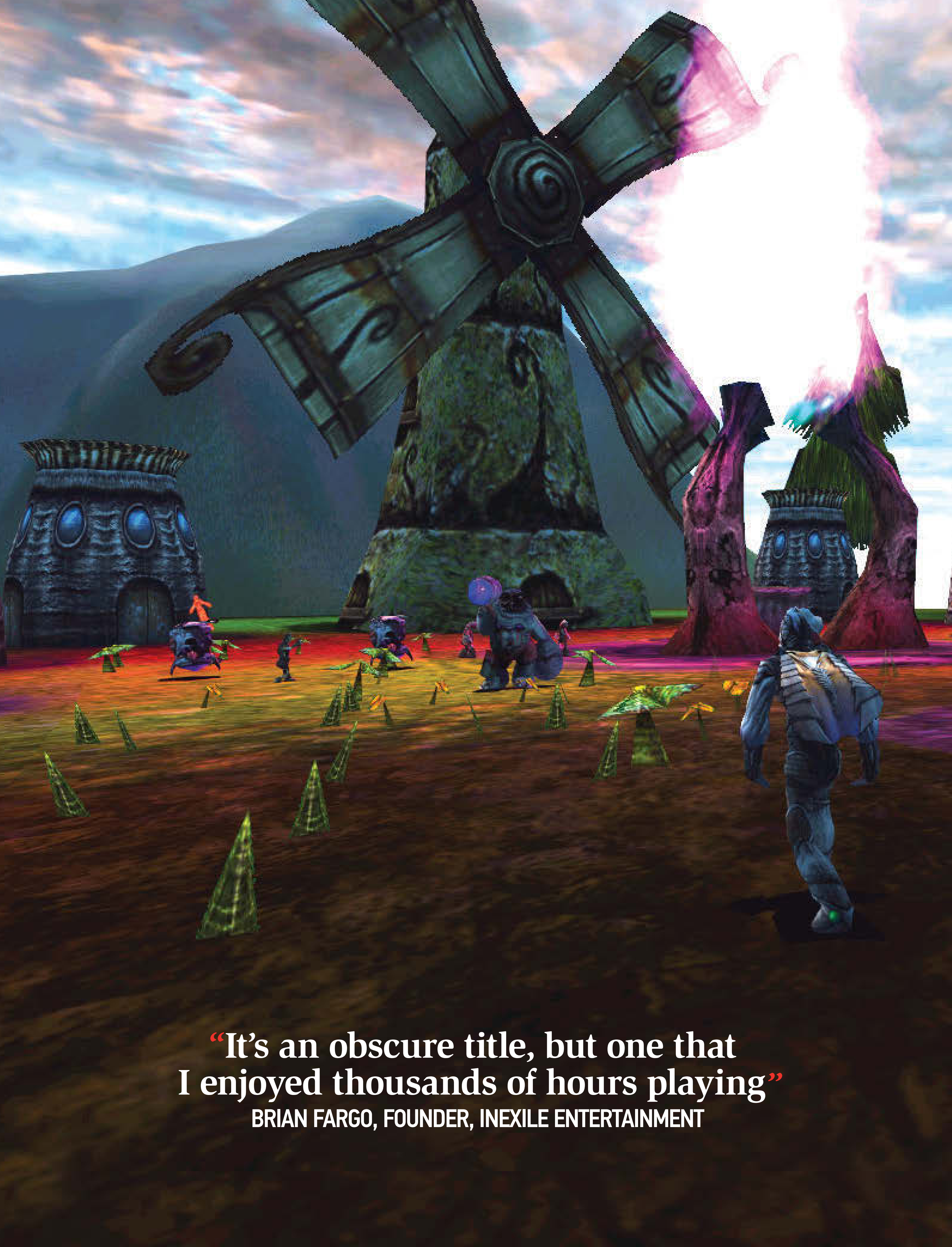
Like I've said before, innovation is the lifeblood of gaming, but it costs. If we shirk our responsibilities to meeting that cost as gamers, then we're not going to be in a position to complain when it's just too costly and risky to make quality games anymore – indie or triple-A – and we're left with derivative, cynical shit because it's the only thing that it makes financial sense to produce. So support your local developer – go buy their games, and pay them what they deserve.



Dan Pinchbeck is the creative director at The Chinese Room. His views aren't necessarily representative of **games™**



FIREWATCH, THE GAME WITH ART DIRECTION FROM OLLY MOSS, HAS BEEN DATED FOR 9 FEBRUARY



"It's an obscure title, but one that I enjoyed thousands of hours playing"
BRIAN FARGO, FOUNDER, INEXILE ENTERTAINMENT

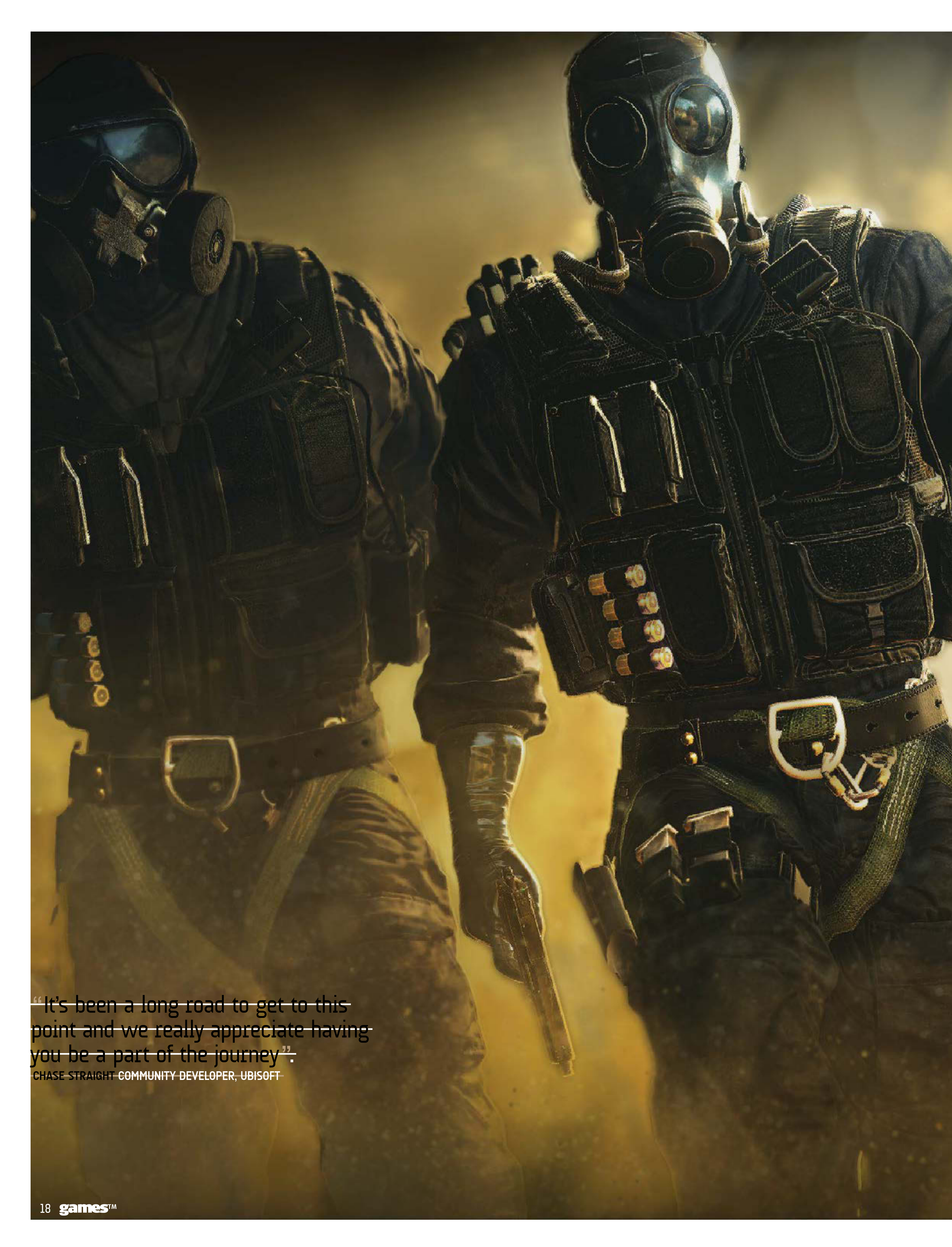


WHY I ♥...

SACRIFICE

BRIAN FARGO, FOUNDER, INXILE ENTERTAINMENT

“Well, I guess the game that I love and have put the most hours into is a game called Sacrifice *– a game that Shiny Entertainment did back in the late Nineties. It’s an obscure title, but one that I enjoyed thousands of hours playing. It was just a wonderful two versus two multiplayer game and I just had a blast with that. I always like to cite that one when people ask what my favourite game is, especially because it’s not a typical* Mario Bros. *or something like that!”*



"It's been a long road to get to this point and we really appreciate having you be a part of the journey".
CHASE STRAIGHT COMMUNITY DEVELOPER, UBISOFT



Tom Clancy's Rainbow Six: Siege

CONCEPT It's terrorists versus counter-terrorists; like *Counter-Strike* but set in the rich and diverse Tom Clancy universe

~~Burning down the house!~~

Ubisoft's newest FPS carries the name '*Siege*' for a reason. That's what the game has been designed around – the idea that you can be trapped inside a house, desperately reinforcing every possible point of entry, whilst your opponents hurl grenades at you, suppress you with covering fire, send in drones to sniff you out… it's the closest we're ever going to get to a good old-fashioned siege in this day in age.

And therein lies the game's core conceit. We've had some great fun with *Siege* in the various alphas, betas and press demos we've managed to get our hands on, but there's one thing, more than any other game out there at the moment, that *Siege* trades on… and that's teamwork. Certain operatives on each team carry unique gadgets and tools, and if you want the upper hand over your rivals, you need *constant* communication with your teams. *Siege* isn't a game that revolves around simple deathmatches – that would be disingenuous to its title. No, *Siege* is much more objective-driven than that, and if you're playing with teammates that insist on kamikaze tactics over doing what they're supposed to, you're going to have a bad time.

As such, we actually found ourselves becoming something of a commander during our limited time with the game: playing as 'the sledgehammer guy', we ended up specialising in destruction. If the enemy erected defences, barricades, or came up with other methods of keeping us away, we came in hard and fast and broke them down. For this, we needed someone with a medium-to-long range rifle on our backs, and someone close by on defensive duties. Luckily, the builds in-game are specifically constructed towards this… but unluckily, not a lot of the players really knew how to move as a team.

So we began barking orders at our teammates (all illusion of friendliness goes out the proverbial window when you're in the middle of a war, right?) and things started to go smoothly. We knew from one of the drones our ally sent out that the *entire* enemy force was huddled in a top bedroom in the house map, so we slowly and silently made our way upstairs. We positioned the soldier with his ballistic shield to our left, covering us from anyone that came through the reinforced door to flank us. On our other side we directed our chief shotgunner, and told her to cook a grenade. On three, we'd bust through the walls and take these guys out.

/// One, two… three. We slam the sledgehammer through the drywall and surprise the enemies – two are crowded around a door and the other two are on lookout at the window, surveying the suburban outskirts. We crouch, put our hammer away, and pull out our sidearm. The cooked grenade sails through the hole and takes out the two operatives at the window. Our ballistic shield puts a hole through one of the other guy's heads but falls to a burst of assault rifle fire from the other. We dispatch that guy – vengeance! – and then begin our hunt for the last operative whilst our shotgunner plays the objective (namely: diffusing bombs).

Siege is a brave step for Ubisoft in an FPS market dominated and fuelled by single-player progression. The way you level up in, say, *Call Of Duty* or *Halo* focuses on pushing *you* forward, making *you* get the objectives and the kills and the assists so that you might unlock that new perk or bit of customisable armour. As such, there's a lack of focus on co-operative play, and you'll find most players opt for private voice chat rather than in-game party options. That won't work here: we played a few games with *no* on-team communication, and we were like lambs to the slaughter. If you come up against an opponent that's in line, in time and in sync, you'll lose. That is, you'll lose unless you match their co-operation.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PC, PS4, Xbox One
Origin: Canada
Publisher: Ubisoft
Developer: Ubisoft Montreal
Release: 1 December 2015
Players: 1-10

Developer Profile

Ubisoft Montreal is responsible for the *Far Cry*, *Assassin's Creed* and *Splinter Cell* series, among many more. Practising since 1997, the studio is one of the biggest contributors to the gaming industry. It's very much the lynchpin that holds the bigger Ubisoft empire together.

Developer History

Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag **2013 [Multi]**
Far Cry 3: Blood Dragon **2013 [Multi]**
Just Dance 3 **2011 [Wii, 360]**
Tom Clancy's Splinter Cell: Conviction **2010 [Multi]**

High Point

Far Cry 3: Blood Dragon was a totally left-field game that was announced on April Fool's Day and yet, somehow, wasn't a joke. It showed a willingness to poke fun at itself that we never thought we'd see from Ubisoft…

So *Siege* is gunning for the slower FPS market – it doesn't rely on the twitch reactions of *Call Of Duty*, it hasn't got the sci-fi inspired modes of *Destiny* or *Halo*… it's basically *Counter-Strike* via Ubisoft. But where it differs from *Counter-Strike* is in some of its more traditional 'Tom Clancy-specific' modes. Terrorist Hunt, for example, is a breath of fresh air if you're tired of desperately gunning for the top spot with squad mates that either don't care or are too self-driven to try and make it as a team.

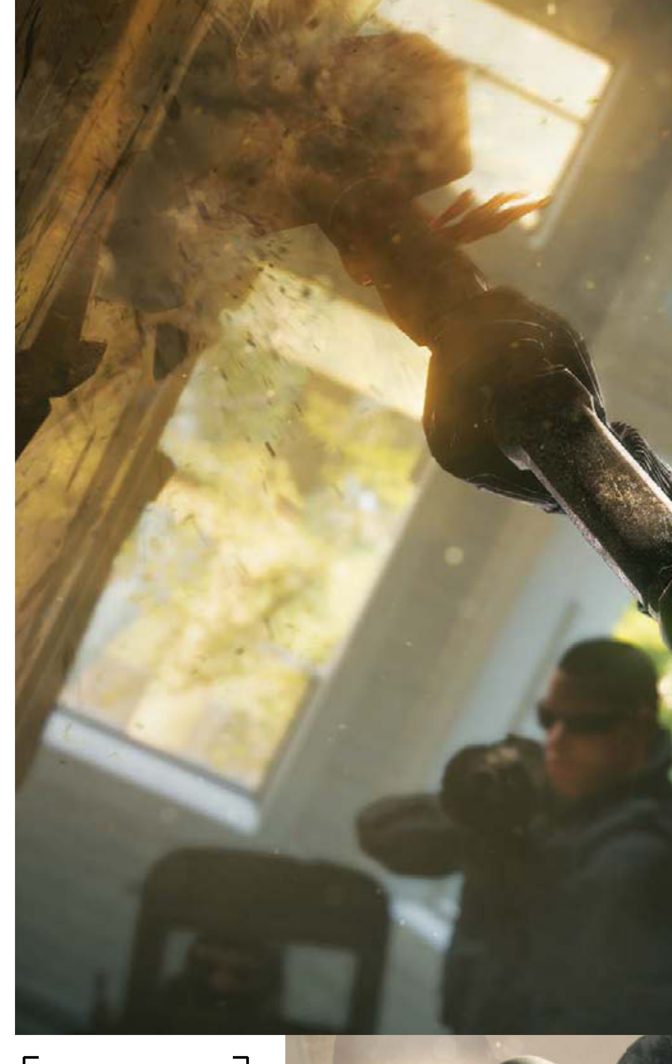
/// Terrorist Hunt is a team of five real players versus up to 24 AI enemies. If you prefer to go in 'lone wolf', you can – and that seems to be all the final game has to offer when it comes to single-player content. You can still grind it out in here on your lonesome, but expect less in-game cash and rewards if you opt to do this. Whilst going in solo isn't a bad way to level up and unlock some of the classes, the game doesn't really shine when you go in on your own – expect the AI to come down on you *hard* and expect very, very little in the way of mercy. At least when there's a team of five of you taking on the enemies, you can split them up and only have to take out about four operatives each before the odds are in your favour… on our own, we could take down fewer than five before being utterly destroyed.

We will give credit to the AI programmers, though, because the way each enemy type is personified and brought to life is inspiring – we've never been so scared of AI artillerymen before. The boomers in *Siege* seem to have taken all their inspiration from the game's title, because it seems their only motive is to besiege the hell out of your position. If you've got three or four of these bombers alive at once, prepare to bed down and *never* move, because they're relentless. It's a shame there isn't a full single-player campaign in the final product, because the AI is a distinct step up from the blood-hungry drones we're used to seeing in other titles. They'll chip away at your cover if you're behind it, they'll flank you, they'll erect their own defences and hem themselves in if they're in a tight spot. Largely, they operate like real people… let's hope Ubisoft applies whatever its learnt about AI here into *The Division* when that finally comes out.

It's almost worth playing nothing but Terrorist Hunt for the first few hours of your time with *Siege* because it sort of teaches you how to play. If you've got supporting players that don't mind *not* hogging all the glory, you can put them on ballistics duty and have them mimic the AI. That gives the more mobile players – shotgunners, SMG carriers, explosives experts – the chance to get in close and strip the final layer of defence away from the defending players. Mimicking the AI may sound cheap, but ultimately, no-one knows how the classes are balanced better than Ubisoft, and riffing on the developers' take on class rules and tactics is practically going to guarantee you victory, right? Well, not exactly…

> "Every issue you experience during the beta is potentially one less issue you'll see at launch"
>
> LORENZO AUREA

/// As with all the best shooters out there, there's an unpredictable element of chaos that runs through the core of *Siege*, and

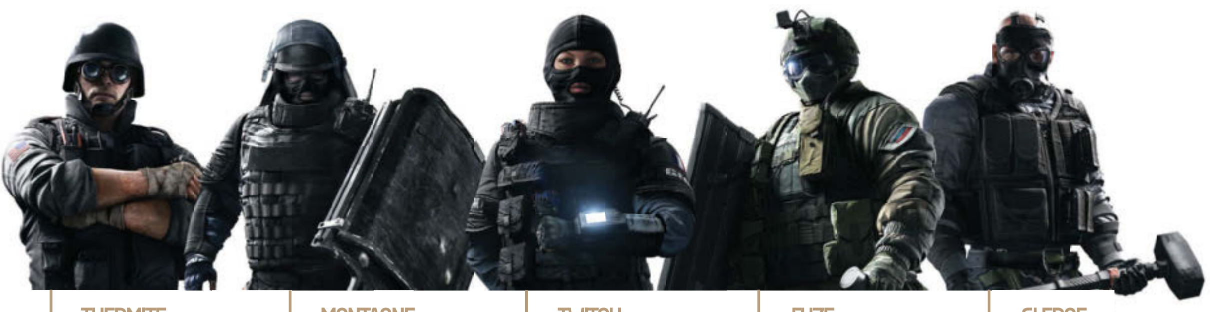




Right: The team that plays with united purpose and intent should ultimately win time after time, whether that's against human opponents or taking out terrorist AI. Headsets are highly recommended at all times.

ATTACKERS

IN *CALL OF Duty*, *Titanfall* and other modern FPS games, you can practically pick whatever class you like and hedge your bets… but it's a bit more complex in *Siege*. Here are our recommended teams for both attackers and defenders.



THERMITE
Armour: Medium
Speed: Medium
Special Weapon: Exothermic Charge

MONTAGNE
Armour: Heavy
Speed: Slow
Special Weapon: Extendable Shield

TWITCH
Armour: Medium
Speed: Medium
Special Weapon: Shock Drone

FUZE
Armour: Heavy
Speed: Slow
Special Weapon: Cluster Charge

SLEDGE
Armour: Medium
Speed: Medium
Special Weapon: Breaching Hammer

that can be as hilariously emergent as it can be annoying. The destruction portion of the game, for example, is fantastic – the graphics and modular elements that feed into dynamic level change are both great, but we're still getting used to the visual language that depicts exactly what can and can't be destroyed. Cut to us walking around the airplane or the house knocking on every bit of wall, floor, object or door frame to see what can be taken down. Cut to us twitching on the floor three seconds later after someone scopes us out from across the hall. Granted, that's our fault, and we're sure we'll learn exactly what *is* and *isn't* destructible in time, but for now, it seems like us and a lot of other players were trying to 'juggernaut' our way through every wall, every barricade and every objective… often with disastrous results. *Red Faction: Guerrilla* this is not.

Siege is somewhat of a radical departure from the Tom Clancy games that have come before it, and that might end up being divisive for longer-running followers of the series. For fans of hardcore, competitive shooting, multiplayer modes run at a smooth 60 frames per second and we noticed very little performance dropping, even during the beta (it's worth noting that, due to the AI running in Terrorist Hunt, that mode is capped to 30 frames per second). We anticipate an incredibly strong following to attach themselves to *Siege*, but whether or not that'll permeate into the mainstream remains to be seen – this is worlds away from *Call Of Duty*. Ultimately *Rainbow Six* has always been its own beast and it remains as unique and brutally challenging as ever. Ubisoft may have simplified and condensed the experience, but that's only made it tenser, and hunting terrorists in a tight group of friends remains as engrossing as ever.

■ Sledge has proved to be a very popular character to select, perhaps in part due to being the first you can unlock, but also because laying waste to barriers is very satisfying to do.

DEFENDERS

HOLD YOUR GROUND or go on the offensive? That's the challenging question you must always answer when defending in *Rainbow Six Siege*. Here's the team that will get you through to the end regardless of your tactical choice.



PULSE
Armour: Light
Speed: Fast
Special Weapon: Cardiac Sensor

ROOK
Armour: Heavy
Speed: Slow
Special Weapon: Armour Pack

MUTE
Armour: Medium
Speed: Medium
Special Weapon: Signal Disrupter

BANDIT
Armour: Medium
Speed: Medium
Special Weapon: Shock Wire

SMOKE
Armour: Medium
Speed: Medium
Special Weapon: Remote Gas Grenade





2

Far Cry Primal

CONCEPT ■ The sandbox exploration and survival of *Far Cry* turns to Stone Age-era hunters as you seek to become the leader of a primitive tribe

Unleashing your inner beast

We're concerned this might be where the wheels come off. And we mean that figuratively, as *Far Cry Primal* is actually dumping the wheels for this instalment, taking us into the Stone Age for its latest exploration of survival against the odds. No, the wheels we speak of are the core gameplay of *Far Cry* in recent years, because it feels like this concept might be stretched too thin, too soon. We loved *Far Cry 3*, we adored *Blood Dragon* and its insanity, we really enjoyed *Far Cry 4* (but felt it was a little similar to the previous game) and now we have another title releasing less than 18 months later. But this concept just looks so enticing. No guns, no vehicles, just crafting with your hands, hunting with your wits and exploring a dangerous landscape in the hopes of finding a new home. It's *Far Cry* boiled down to some central mechanics and a solid narrative through-line. That's very promising, and yet we remain horribly torn about it all. We really want this one to deliver.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: Xbox One, PS4, PC
Origin: Canada
Publisher: Ubisoft
Developer: Ubisoft Montreal
Release: 23 February 2016
Players: 1-TBC

Developer Profile

You've probably played more than one game from Ubisoft Montreal. It's been at the epicentre of triple-A production for most of the last two generations, although some recent releases have started to look a little tired. It's a studio that keeps pushing boundaries though.

Developer History

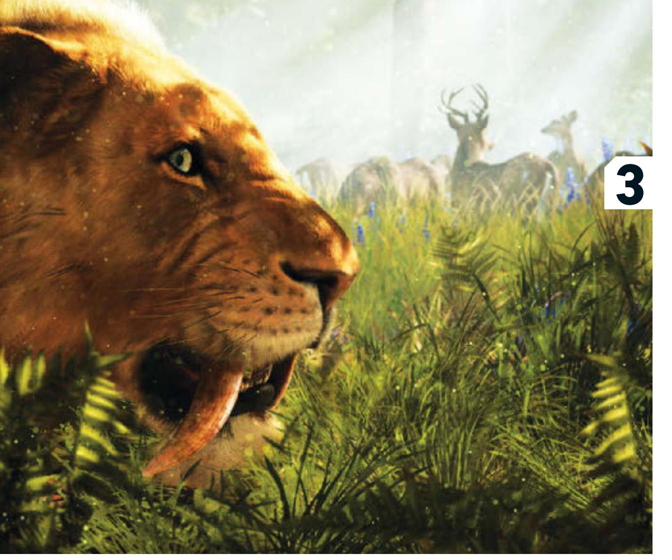
Far Cry 4
2014 [Multi]
Assassin's Creed Unity
2014 [Multi]
Watch Dogs
2014 [Multi]

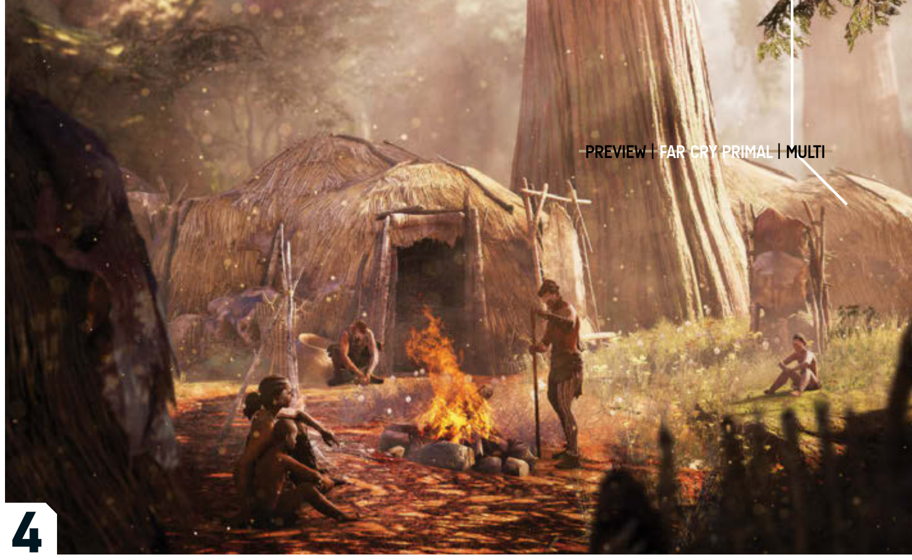
High Point

Far Cry 3: Blood Dragon was a big moment for the studio, not least because it showed that if you take the reins off this group it can produce fun and innovative ideas on multiple platforms.

1 TRAVEL BACK TO 10,000 BC

10,000 BC IS a classic year for one reason or another, in part because it marks a significant period in the history of humanity where we can say with some degree of certainty that men and women were not at the top of the food chain. In fact, they were faced with many dangers from the unknown wilderness. There are predators in this age far bigger and stronger than any one person or even a group could handle. And that's pretty much where this game will start you off, as the lone survivor of a hunting party, unarmed and desperate. Sounds like a pretty solid introduction to us.





5

"The interesting thing about Far Cry is that it's flexible, so when a team proposed to explore the idea of a Far Cry taking place during the Stone Age, we just said 'Let's hear it!'"

DAN HAY EXECUTIVE PRODUCER, UBISOFT

2 MAMMOTH HERD HUNTING

AND THE ANIMALS revealed so far are classic in terms of Stone Age storytelling over the years, with mammoths dominating the images so far. Seeking herds of these gigantic beasts, attempting to isolate them and take one out with a group of tribal comrades promises to be a challenging highlight, although perhaps not for the squeamish or for animal lovers. These animals have been extinct for a while now, though, and they're also not real, so we're hoping we can put that to one side and just assume we're all agreed this would be a pretty epic battle on all counts.

3 THEY MOSTLY COME OUT AT NIGHT

A DAY-NIGHT CYCLE in the game means that unless you learn how to make fire (a very modern form of technology for the Stone Age) you'll be working in pitch darkness in the wilderness. What's more, animals will behave differently at night, as might any human wanderers you discover in your travels. You might even find some nocturnal creatures you'll need to deal with. Bottom line: working at night is a highly treacherous endeavour, but one that can be survived with the right tools and a sure foot. Just mind out for steep cliff faces in the murky dark.

4 ENROL IN WOODWORKING 101

DO YOU KNOW how to whittle? Carve? It might prove to be important. Stranded alone as you are at the beginning of this game with absolutely no weapons and no friends, you'll be making basic armaments early in the game from wood, stone and bone wherever you can get your hands on them. As your crafting ability improves you'll be able to improve and upgrade your tools and weapons, but clubs, spears, axes, and bows will be your only offensive outlets. It's all going to be melee and short range work for you in *Far Cry Primal*.

5 A NEW LEADER IS BORN

IT'S NOT CLEAR yet to what degree we'll get some player choice in this incarnation of *Far Cry* and whether or not we could play through the story as more of a lone wanderer if we choose. The narrative being pushed at the moment is that you can form your own tribe as Takkar, our new protagonist, and rise as leader of this new group. But that means feeding them, protecting them and presumably building shelters. It sounds intriguing, but the last thing we also want to know is, can we do it all in co-op? That has yet to be revealed.



CREATIVE REBELLION

FROM OUR HOURS with this game so far, we can safely say this: it *really* pushes you into being creative with how you play. You can approach it like a standard open world game, but you'll be punished. You know how *Metal Gear Solid V* makes you keep changing the way you infiltrate by giving enemies more and more defences and detection mechanisms? Well, *Just Cause* sort of does that with how it wants you to destroy stuff… The difference is, this game just keeps giving you more stuff to blow up. And that really is going to be the highlight of every review you're going to read. We're calling that now.



As Rico, you'll be in charge of liberating the island of Medici and all in the typical *Just Cause* style.

Just Cause 3

CONCEPT Nico is coming home…But it's not the home he left. A despotic ruler has risen up and holds the island in an iron fist. It's time to take it back

Parachuting for the stars

When we've been playing *Just Cause 3*, there's a level to the game's systems that we can't quite pin down. This isn't a bad thing – far from it – but there's an uncannyness to how the island of Medici works that piques our curiosity. The way the game manages to fuse AI, destructibility and physics into one big melting pot is fascinating; they all work cohesively, they all work seamlessly and you're the agent of chaos in the middle of them all, prodding at different bits of the flesh to see what responds.

We were flying down from a mountain, for example, on our fancy new wingsuit – watching Rico's lovely little movements and animations as he fell (at one point, he seemed to stretch his fingers out and feel the air rushing through them). We then readied our rocket launcher and aimed it at a tanker… We were aware there was a helicopter on our backs, bearing down on us, but rather than risk firing a missile right past the chopper, we thought we'd just cause some havoc on the ground instead.

The result was better than we could have expected. The RPG round caused the tanker to explode, but unlike in other games, where there's simply a blast radius that would kill those around it, the shockwave sent a nearby car screaming up into the sky. The car collided with the chopper, then *that* exploded too and the mass of soldiers waiting on the floor scarpered – obviously thoroughly intimidated by the way we just accidentally took out their backup.

Now, that in itself would have been a pretty interesting setpiece back in the days of scripted games, but the fact that this was a totally emergent experience that we ourselves caused is even more impressive. Because the whole world has been built with modular elements, you can go around and break it apart, piece by piece. We saw individual panels of water towers peel away from their parent structures; entire corner buildings of Mediterranean forts crumble to the ground; tyres from cars roll down the road as the vehicle became a burning husk. It's an open world rethought for this generation – not just giving you expansive areas to explore, but building it in an iterative way, letting you strip back the bits of it you don't like. It's *Red Faction* 2015.

So the island of Medici feels like an actual world with as much depth as it has breadth, but that means nothing unless *you* feel like the centre of it. To that end, *Just Cause* is re-establishing its most valuable asset: your toolbox. The videos and trailers that you see of the game make it look incredibly easy to pick up the game and just play, but it's not quite that simple. The game introduces you to the elements of destruction in a modular fashion – the wingsuit being the best example by far.

You're introduced to the traversal mechanic fairly early, but it takes *a lot* longer to properly understand how it really works: the sharpness of the pitches, the sluggishness of the rising and falling and the delicacy at which you need to manoeuvre if you want to nip between that pillar and that wall… The faster Rico moves, the more you're going to have to course correct and the more you're going to have to fight the myriad physics that are trying to pull you off your path. It's only a small thing, but it's a very impressive thing.

Like Avalanche's *Mad Max* before it, this game is a playground built on physics – and watching people learn to use the wingsuit, grappling hook and parachute to maximum efficiency is certainly going to be a highlight of this game's life cycle.

> "We've been focused purely on the new generation of high-end technology from the very beginning"
> ROLAND LESTERLIN

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PC, PS4, Xbox One
Origin: USA
Publisher: Square Enix
Developer: Avalanche Studios
Release: 1 December 2015
Players: 1

Developer Profile

Founded in 2003 by brothers Linus and Viktor Blomberg alongside Christofer Sundberg, Avalanche is both a game developer and game engine creator that specialises in making new IP within its own engines. Based across Stockholm and New York, the studio has a unique trans-Atlantic flavour to its games.

Developer History

Just Cause **2006 [PS2, Xbox, Xbox 360, PC]**
The Hunter **2009 [PC]**
Renegade Ops **2011 [PS3, PC, Xbox 360]**
Mad Max **2015 [PS4, Xbox One, PC]**

High Point

Just Cause 2 (2010) offered gamers a different kind of anarchy in the open world genre, swapping out the dull concrete of its peers for a lush, vibrant tropical island.

"Our vision with For Honor is to create a game that ignites the same emotions that a warrior would feel on a real battlefield"
JASON VANDENBERGHE, CREATIVE DIRECTOR, UBISOFT

■ As well as hero characters on each team you have dozens of AI grunts to command and slice your way through. Killstreaks will also be rewarded with special attacks such as catapult fire or a rain of arrows.

For Honor

CONCEPT ■ Three disciplines of the martial art of combat clash in a multiplayer battlefield as Knights, Samurai and Vikings go toe to toe

~~Can it avoid the spoiling of war?~~

It's good to see that we're entering a new era of multiplayer. One that's comfortable in simplicity. That values execution over lists of features. *For Honor* embraces this philosophy with its basic premise of multiplayer sword-fighting. It tips its hat to team-based shooters like *Left 4 Dead* and massive arena battling like *League Of Legends*. But it's not overcomplicating things. There's a simple rock, paper, scissors line of thinking to this innovative sword-combat experience that's refreshing.

The stance-based system is fascinating to watch play out, and we'll be interested to see if it gets picked up by pro gamers as it looks like it might have some potential in this arena. Match the stance of your opponent and you can block, parry and launch into a move of your own. It's great to see this play out, particularly between varying warrior types such as a Viking against a Samurai where differences in speed, armour and style can have a real impact. As can environment, as fighters with wider sword swings can have difficulty in cramped conditions, smashing their longswords against the walls and having their swings interrupted. It offers a lot of options to smarter players.

But it may not ultimately be as elegant as we first hoped or saw when Ubisoft revealed *For Honor* a few months back. While the one-on-one combat looks excellent in the right hands, the reality is more brutish. Put average gamers at the controls of these warriors and it quickly descends into a slug-fest, often made rather abrupt if you get ganged up on. You can fight off two attackers in theory, but the reality looks tougher.

What this teaches us about *For Honor* though, is not that it has the potential to be imbalanced or infuriating to purists, but rather that teamwork needs to be respected. You're less likely to be hit from pillar to post by two assailants if you have someone at your side. Working in tandem with your team is essential, both for capturing points on the map in certain game modes and for surviving against other heroes on the battlefield.

We're looking forward to seeing what additional game modes might add to the experience though, as FPS staples look to offer the bulk of the online options come launch time. It's also been confirmed that *For Honor* will feature a solo campaign mode, although we can't help but feel it might be a little superfluous in the end. Perhaps as a training system it will be worth experiencing, but in the name of simplicity, we'd say this game has enough content to it already.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PS4, Xbox One, PC
Origin: Canada
Publisher: Ubisoft
Developer: Ubisoft Montreal
Release: 2016
Players: 1-8

Developer Profile

Jason VandenBerghe is heading up the huge Ubisoft Montreal team on this project and has been working on ideas around sword combat for a good few years. His previous creative director roles have seen him in charge of a fair few high-profile titles experimenting in different genres and fields.

Developer History

Prince Of Persia: The Forgotten Sands **2010 [Multi]**
Far Cry 3 **2012 [Multi]**
Assassin's Creed III **2012 [Multi]**

High Point

Far Cry 3 was a massive step for this series, establishing its sandbox credentials and setting it up for games to come. *Far Cry 4* proved that this template would yield great results for the future.



■ Above: We're very impressed by some of the armour detailing we're seeing in these early images from the game. *For Honor* looks very impressive graphically.

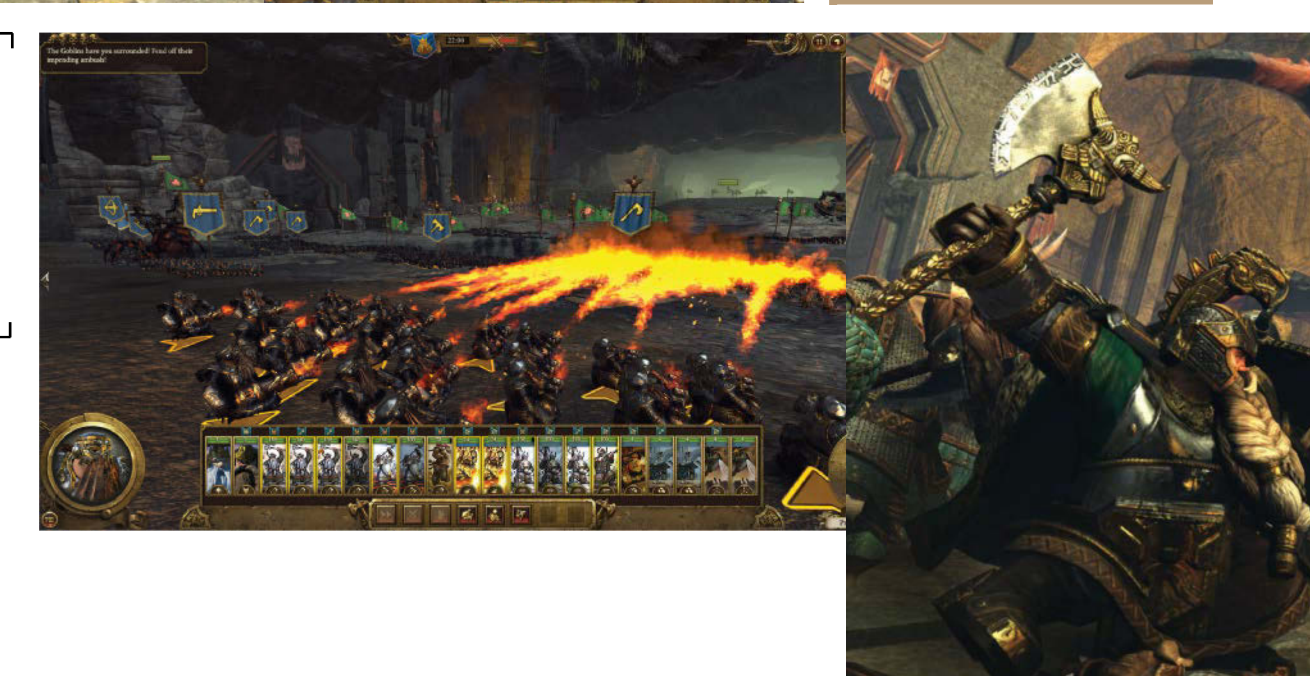
These are the Dwarven Slayers, dishonoured warriors who have taken an oath to die in battle. It essentially turns them into berserkers – unable to be disheartened in battle.



ON A QUEST

QUEST BATTLES ARE prescribed fights that appear on the campaign map and aren't determined by the resources of the AI. It's a scripted event, essentially, pitting you against a very specific enemy force in very specific situations – in the case of this preview, the Dwarven defence of its Underway stronghold against a Greenskin assault. You'll be able to pick the forces you go in with – and often may have to return once you've upgraded certain units or heroes – but the encounter will require all your smarts to succeed; these are designed as much to tell a story as to test you.

Right: The flamethrower units are unsurprisingly a risky unit to use, but when utilised properly – creating kill spots for incoming melee units, for example – they can be a formidable unit to have on your team. Their beard armour is just one example of the detail that is being put into *Total War: Warhammer*.



Total War: Warhammer

CONCEPT ■ It's really rather simple: take the Warhammer franchise and tag it onto the hugely popular *Total War* series of strategy games. The only surprise is that it's taken this long

Know yourself, know your enemy

There's a sense that Creative Assembly has been let off the leash with its latest *Total War* title. While it's a franchise that has often gone from strength to strength as it expands and improves upon that now-familiar template, it's always been a series often limited by its realism. A dedication to history – even if your input twists and bends the truth of events – restricts the possible units and structures available, while an insistence on balancing the gameplay ensures the rock-paper-scissors nature of it remains core to the RTS.

In playing a build of *Total War: Warhammer*, however, it's clear the developer is making the most of its fantasy setting. That sense of balancing is still there, admittedly, but now – more than ever before – there's a much greater distinction between the opposing forces of any given field of war. In our battle we were the Dwarven faction duking it out against the Greenskins, a mass of Orcs, Goblins and their behemoth spider units the Arachnarok. These eight-legged warriors are a considerable threat, powering through our standard units with relative ease, a considerable advantage for the Greenskins that really needed to be tackled first. It gives proceedings a more cinematic feel, though, with these larger threats becoming a bigger focus during the mission and making them all the more rewarding once you manage to fell such a significant unit.

But while the Dwarves don't feature such overbearing units, they do still come equipped with a special advantages of their own. The Gyrocopters, for example, completely ignore any attempt at frontline defence our opposition might cobble together, instead fluttering across the battlefield to drop its payload on the dangers at the back of the enemy forces. The satisfaction in doing so is enhanced with the manual timing of these units, providing an extra sense of personal savviness when those bombs hit *just so* to scatter an entire regiment of Greenskins through the air.

/// Because of these distinctions there's a newfound need to understand not only the minutiae of your own units but those of your enemy, too. Where *Total War* is traditionally about countering one threat with another, now it's more about figuring out what your opposition is capable of and preempting that potential danger. Though we've yet to get hands-on with each of the announced factions, it's clear that there's a bigger emphasis on making each side feel unique, not only in terms of their aesthetic appearance and the special abilities of their units but also in a far grander manner.

Dwarves, for example, have nothing in the way of cavalry, therefore relying on their hardy natures to withstand against great assaults rather than rampaging axe-first into battle. Their defensiveness comes from their ranged units, the likes of flamethrowers and heavy cannons. Similarly, those heavily armoured Arachnaroks are best injured with piercing damage, reinforcing the idea that it's important to know what you're up against to ably fight it.

The addition of hero units is particularly interesting for the *Total War* franchise, though. While the series has long had special commander units that award morale boosts to nearby rank and file regiments, here these instead act more akin to *Warcraft III*'s heroes – specific named characters with added bonuses and special abilities. This adds a whole new twist to the core gameplay, and again gives players a central aspect to defend and protect that feels so much more important – if not for the story, then for their offensive capabilities.

> "We're bringing Warhammer to life in a way that nobody's attempted before"
> IAN ROXBURGH

By utilising Warhammer, developer Creative Assembly has been able to really enhance its own base gameplay, and in doing so it has created a very faithful rendition of the game. That sense of grand war was always something both franchises captured extremely well so it's hardly surprising the two work so well together. We've yet to see the strategic layer and only had a single faction to play with, but if this game manages to maintain that sense of scale, of control and of balance then the addition of Warhammer could, ironically, make this the most significant *Total War* game for a while.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PC
Origin: UK
Publisher: Sega
Developer: Creative Assembly
Release: 2016
Players: TBC

Developer Profile

Creative Assembly is one of the UK's most successful developers, having begun in the late Eighties porting different games over to DOS. It wasn't until the release of *Shogun: Total War* in 2000 that the developer's success really took off.

Developer History

Shogun: Total War **2000 [PC]**
Rome: Total War **2004 [PC]**
Empire: Total War **2009 [PC]**
Alien: Isolation **2014 [PS4]**

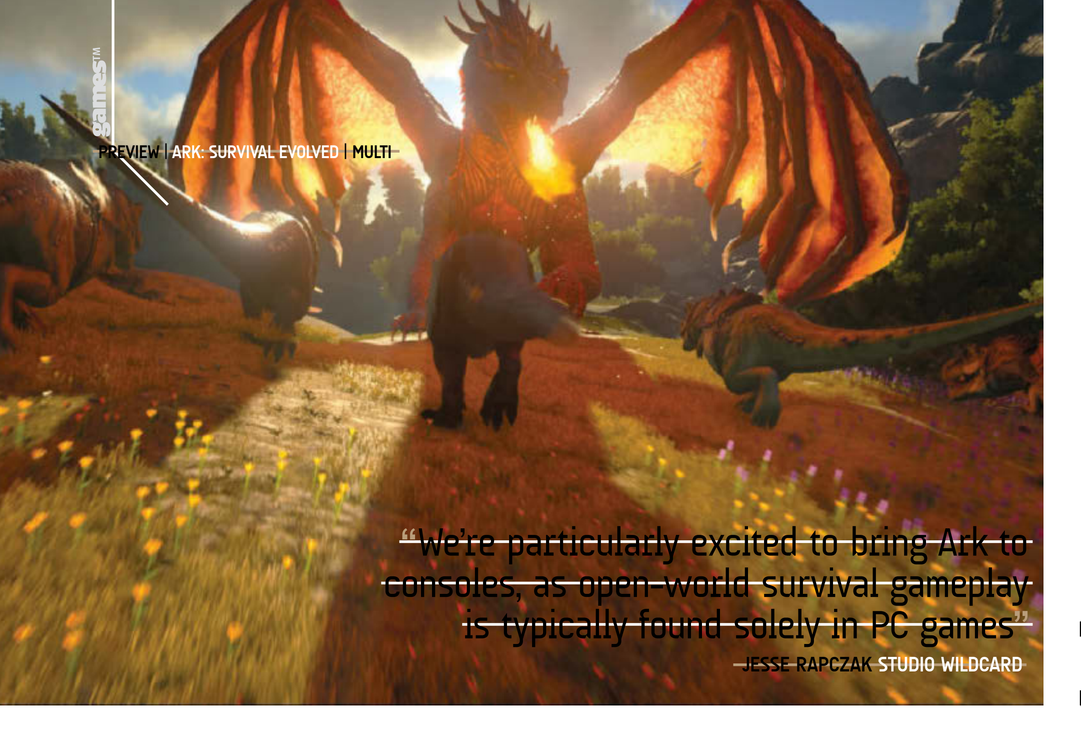
High Point

Strategy has long been Creative Assembly's staple, but *Alien: Isolation* was quite a shift in focus for the company – and a huge success.





■ Left: You need to really make the most of your units – especially in Quest Battles – to overcome threats like giants, Arachnaroks and any spellcasters. Agents – or hero units – are important for this.



"We're particularly excited to bring Ark to consoles, as open-world survival gameplay is typically found solely in PC games"
—JESSE RAPCZAK STUDIO WILDCARD



Above: As if the prospect of living in a world with dinosaurs wasn't exciting enough, you also get to use them as mounts.

Ark: Survival Evolved

CONCEPT The world is overrun with dinosaurs and mammals we thought were extinct. You've also got a selection of guns and can do what you like

An MMO of Jurassic proportions

There are over 60 dinosaurs in *Ark: Survival Evolved.* If that doesn't hook you and draw you in straight away, nothing will. It's *DayZ* mixed with *Jurassic Park*, except more brutal, more open, more fun. Every dinosaur can be tamed and ridden into battle as a mount. But it's not as easy as just walking up to one and jumping on its scaly neck – you've got to earn the trust of these beasts. You have to feed them, tame them, earn their trust.

Once you *do* gain the ability to ride them, you lose access to your weapons and you lose access to your attacks (it takes a lot of effort to pilot a pterodactyl, you know?) On the upside, if you've got friends journeying to this virtual land before time with you, they'll be able to mount up beside you – ride on the dinosaur's tail, or wings, or even head. *These* players can keep their weapons equipped. *These* players can be the attack force. If you think about it in a certain way, you can basically use your newly tamed Stegosaurus as an armoured assault vehicle.

So, once you've got a crew of hunters atop your living war-machine, you can choose to do one of many things. Be a pacifist and simply go exploring, wander around the game's 48 kilometre squared map and find materials to build your settlement. Think about it: a nice seaside camp with stables for your Velociraptor army, a little bar for you and your friends to debrief, and a watchtower to keep out pesky raiders. You can make all of that – the crafting element of *Ark* is extensive and tied into its RPG elements: for every level you achieve, more items become available for you to use in crafting.

Otherwise… you can go toxic. You can hunt down other players (with less impressive, puny dinosaurs) and execute them. You can hold them hostage, stampede them to death, slowly kill them with sticks… whatever you like. You could wage war on a neighbouring settlement, you could sneak in and try to steal their dinosaurs and make them *yours*.

Ark: Survival Evolved is truly a very open simulator, one of the most open and imaginative products out there. The development team behind the game has intentionally been adding features throughout the game's production to ensure it caters to the tastes of most players – from the most intense survival experts to casuals that would just like to explore. With over 10,000 AI entries running in the Unreal Engine 3 and VR support… this could very easily be the next big MMO.

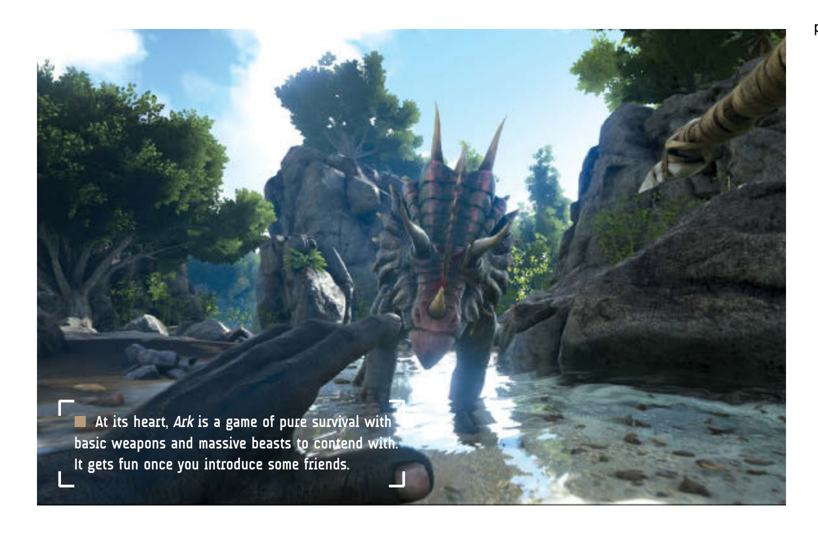
INFORMATION

Details

Format: PS4, Xbox One, PC
Origin: USA
Publisher: Studio Wildcard
Developer: Instinct Games
Release: 2016
Players: 1-12

Developer Profile

Studio Wildcard – publishing and part developing the game – acquired the Egyptian Instinct Games to help them facilitate development of *Ark: Survival Evolved*. The game has been in development since 2014 and both teams have been researching as much as they can about dinosaurs in palaeontological journals.



At its heart, *Ark* is a game of pure survival with basic weapons and massive beasts to contend with. It gets fun once you introduce some friends.







Left: You can use charge attacks, imbue your weapons with magic, bash enemies with your shield… all sorts of moves. Which is good, when faced with mobs like this.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PS4, Vita, PC
Origin: UK
Publisher: Devolver Digital
Developer: Eneme Entertainment
Release: 2016
Players: 1

Developer Profile

Eneme Entertainment was set up by David Wright (artist/designer) and Tobi Harper (coder/developer) with the aim of creating a game that mimicked all the best bits of *Dark Souls*, but with a real strong RPG focus. Both developers are hardcore gamers, citing *Zelda, Street Fighter, Smash Bros, Dark Souls, Diablo* and *Path Of Exile* as their favourite games.

Eitr

CONCEPT Yggdrasil is dying, and it's down to you – an uncompromising shield maiden – to restore life to the tree and save the nine realms

The root of the problem…

Loki is a treacherous bastard, isn't he? When he's not out and about lying to the Gods and fiddling with the Fates, he's tampering with young girls at birth… making them immune from the poisonous and titular eitr that's now coursing through the world tree that holds the universe together.

There's an upside to that: it means that you, brave Shield Maiden, are able to traverse the dying world and slay the demons that are birthed from the primordial poison, cleansing the world of darkness in a courageous attempt to bring the world back from the brink. What that means for actual gameplay is this – *Dark Souls* in 16-bit. That's a very easy (and potentially lazy) comparison to make, but we swear: it's true.

The isometric pixel-art setup of the game might fool you – '*Souls* games are all about 3D action!' we hear you cry – but rest assured: the way *Eitr* makes use of multi-directional attacks, dodges, parries and movements is inspired. Every movement – like *Souls* – is vital to your success. You can't just mash parry and hope to win, no, you've got to time your parries and rolls *and* manage a stamina bar.

Below: You can rest, recoup and save at bonfires. Now, why does that sound familiar?



> "Eitr replaces the traditional experience point structure of an action RPG with the unique Favor System"
> DEVOLVER DIGITAL

You have no experience either – this is as action-RPG as it gets, yet you don't level up. Instead, you earn favours from the Gods. These favours work like expendable buffs – you can trade them in whenever you like, but if you die, they're lost to you forever. Typically, they'll give you stat bonuses, so the longer you stay alive, the better your Shield Maiden will become. On death, however, you'll be penalised (because we all know the Gods *hate* seeing their heroes fail). The thing is, the game doesn't want to lock players that take a while to get to know the systems out of the core gameplay. So you'll find that if you die enough times, then you'll start getting buffed, instead of de-buffed.

But that's all systems stuff. We're going to pick this game up for its mechanics – the combat and the animations stand out. Like everything else Devolver is picking up, the pixels attract us to the game before we even pick up the pad – the heavy and intentional feel of every weapon, every shield, every spell, every movement just enhances the experience even more. We played through a dungeon – dark and dank – taking out skeleton mobs and the occasional big monster – before hitting a boss. After a lot of diving, dodging and eventually switching to dual-wielding a hatchet and a sword, we managed to take the beast down. Think *Souls*: think patience, think time, think trial-and-error and think attention to detail. *Eitr* promises to be godly, *Eitr* promises to be hellish.

SHOWCASE

THE JOURNEY DOWN: CHAPTER 3

Format: PC
Publisher: SkyGoblin
Developer: In-house
ETA: 2016



SKYGOBLIN HAS been steadily releasing chapters to its point and click adventure saga over the past three years, and now, thanks to Kickstarter, we are finally going to receive the final piece of the trilogy. Designed for fans of classic LucasArts titles such as *Monkey Island; The Journey Down* capitalises on nostalgia, all the while forging its own direction with a cast of unique characters and an inarguably gorgeous world design.

BATTLETECH

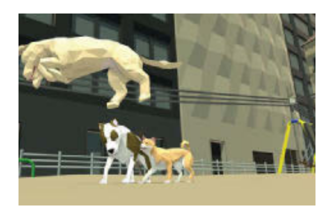
Format: PC
Publisher: Harebrained Schemes
Developer: In-house
ETA: 2016



IF IT feels like you've been waiting for a legit return to *BattleTech* basics for a while, it's because you have. Jordan Weisman is back, the creator of *BattleTech* and *MechWarrior* returns with the first turn-based PC game in the series for over two decades and it's looking great. This tactical mech combat game sees Weisman team up with Harebrained, the folks behind *Shadowrun Returns* and *MechWarrior Online* developers, Piranha Games.

HOME FREE

Format: PC
Publisher: Kevin Cancienne
Developer: In-house
ETA: Q4 2016



WE'VE ALREADY probably had the feeling of being lost in the big city before, but *Home Free* takes it one step further as it puts us in control of tiny paws in large streets. This creation from Kevin Cancienne sees players take control of a lost dog – and yes, there are plenty of breeds to choose from – as you look to find your way home through a procedurally-generated city. Fans of *Dogs Life* pay attention, it's finally happening.

FOR THE KING

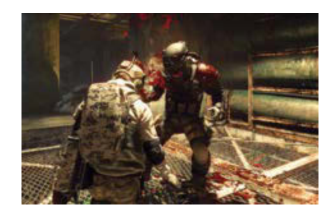
Format: PC, Mac
Publisher: IronOak
Developer: In-house
ETA: 2016



SOMETIMES A fantastic graphical presentation is all that's needed to steal away the attention, but IronOak's *For The King* backs this up with an entertaining array of gameplay options as it proceeds with development following a successful KickStarter campaign. Turn-based combat meets strategic exploration in this online co-op roguelike; and explore we will, because the world looks absolutely stunning from what we've seen.

RESIDENT EVIL: UMBRELLA CORPS

Format: PS4, PC
Publisher: Capcom
Developer: In-house
ETA: Q1 2016



EYEBROWS WERE raised when Capcom elected to move *Resident Evil* into the shooter genre, ahead of revealing *Resident Evil 7*, though it looks like *Umbrella Corps* is far more than an attempt to riff off of *Call Of Duty*. It's a survival-horror third-person shooter with more in common with *Dead Space*; tight rounds of three versus three combat with no re-spawns promises tense action, as does zombie waves.

HITMAN

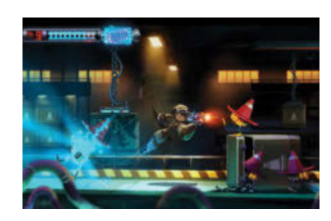
Format: Xbox One, PS4, PC
Publisher: Square Enix
Developer: IO Interactive
ETA: March 2016



THANKS TO its delay into next year, *Hitman* – IO Interactive's wild new early access experiment – will launch with a ton more content than expected. Joining the gigantic Paris fashion show level we've seen time and time again, *Hitman* will also launch with levels set in Sapienza and Marrakesh – along with six campaign missions and a contracts mode featuring 800 targets. This will then be updated with new missions.

MIGHTY NO. 9

Format: Multi
Publisher: Deep Silver
Developer: Comcept
ETA: March 2016



MIGHTY NO. 9 has finally had its 'ETA 2016' release window locked down to March, though we are still yet to see the game in action since its delay from September 2015. Kenji Inafune's *Mega Man* spiritual successor was coming together nicely, but was pushed back due to problems squashing a few final bugs – Comcept is eager for parity across all platforms, so we are looking at you, Wii U, as the troublemaker.

12 IS BETTER THAN 6

Format: PC, Mac, Linux
Publisher: Ink Stains Games
Developer: In-house
ETA: 2016



THERE AREN'T enough games set in the wild west for our liking, which is perhaps why *12 Is Better Than 6* seems so appealing. Look past the simplistic hand-drawn graphics and you have what looks to be a very stylised top-down shooter set in 1873. What the game lacks in stellar level design, it makes up for with incredibly engaging, twitch shooting and surprisingly lovely character models.



ANNOUNCED – TESO: Orsinium

The Elder Scrolls Online's biggest expansion to date is arriving this November, taking you to the home of the orcs, *Orsinium*, for the first time. Will it be enough to re-energise *Elder Scrolls* fans and give the MMO another jolt?

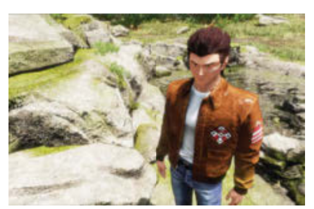


DELAYED – Need For Speed (PC)

Ghost Games has delayed the PC version of *Need for Speed* to 2016, in order to meet fan expectations. That's typically publisher speak for 'this is looking pretty bad, so we're hiding it for a while'.

SHENMUE III

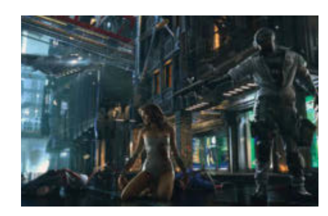
Format: **PC**
Publisher: **Shibuya Productions**
Developer: **YS Net**
ETA: **Q4 2017**



IT'S AS Yu Suzuki begins to start shouting about how he'd like more money to make that game he always planned on making that we start to get a little worried about the development of *Shenmue III*. With a targeted release date of December 2017, there's still plenty of time for roadblocks to be met – but perhaps we're just being cynical, then again it's hard to be anything else when you've waited this many years for a sequel.

CYBERPUNK 2077

Format: **TBC**
Publisher: **CD Projekt RED**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **2017**



IT'S FRUSTRATING, we want more, CD Projekt RED. *The Witcher III: Wild Hunt* has come and gone, and now all we are left with is the agonising wait until 2017 for the studio's science fiction follow up, *Cyberpunk 2077*. Well, perhaps longer: the studio is going to start *talking* about the RPG in 2017, though a release date might be further away – it is already teasing that it will be far, far bigger than any of Geralt's adventures.

NO MAN'S SKY

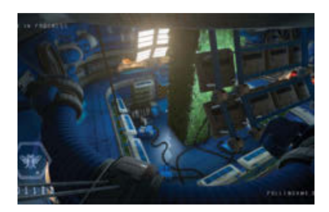
Format: **PC, PS4**
Publisher: **Hello Games**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **TBC**



SEAN MURRAY is a bad, bad man. While continuing to offer little in the way of a release date for Hello Games' horribly ambitious space-exploration game, the creative director is still finding ways to blow our tiny minds. That's what happens when you're promising a game that features 18 quintillion planets and the tease that our own Sun will wither and die before players discover all that's to be seen in *No Man's Sky*. This game might kill completionists.

POLLEN

Format: **PC**
Publisher: **Mindfield Games**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **Q3 2016**



VIRTUAL REALITY is so close to becoming a reality, and that means you should start preparing for a heavy wave of games that look like they'll be better with giant glasses strapped onto your face. *Pollen* takes you on a journey to a research station built on Saturn's largest orbiting moon; it's a sci-fi exploration game listing *Gone Home* and *2001: A Space Odyssey* as its inspirations.

DEAD STAR

Format: **PC, PS4**
Publisher: **Sony**
Developer: **Armature Studios**
ETA: **2016**



SONY COULDN'T let Microsoft have all of the Armature fun now could it? The studio, formed by ex-Retro Studios employees following the completion of *Metriod Prime 3*, is working on a furiously fast, ten-versus-ten twin-stick shooter set on perilous, procedurally-generated maps. This will be the first original project the studio has released on since completing work on *Batman: Arkham Origins Blackgate*.

P.A.M.E.L.A

Format: **PC**
Publisher: **NVYVE**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **Q2 2016**



IT TOOK *P.A.M.E.L.A* just 48 hours to be Greenlit through Steam and for good reason, it looks stunning. Made by a team of just four people, this upcoming sci-fi survival horror looks like it could fill the massive gulf in our hearts where the *BioShock* sequel anticipation used to sit. Matching gorgeous graphics, an interesting A.I angle and running rather than fighting, this should be on every gamer's radar.

INDIVISIBLE

Format: **PS4, Xbox One, PC**
Publisher: **505 Games**
Developer: **Lab Zero Games**
ETA: **Q1 2018**



SKULLGIRLS DEVELOPER Lab Zero Games has teamed up with 505 Games to unleash *Indivisible*, an ambitious new action-RPG. With an estimated release date of 2018, this IndieGoGo funded game is merging side-scrolling metroidvania exploration with *Valkyrie Profile* style four-character combat to create its 30+ hour campaign. It's looking fun and vibrant, but it's difficult to see how development will pan out just yet.

SHIN MEGAMI TENSEI IV FINAL

Format: **3DS**
Publisher: **Atlus**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **TBC**



AFTER A whole lot of teasing, Atlus has revealed that its latest project will be an all new game set in the *SMT IV* world for Nintendo 3DS. A Western release is yet to be confirmed, but we have our fingers crossed – especially as producer Kazuyuki Yamai, director Satoshi Ohyama, character designer Masashi Doi, composer Ryota Kozuka and demon designer Kazuma Kaneko are all set to return.



STAR WARS BATTLEFRONT

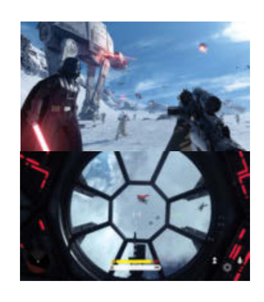
As DICE's latest shooter nears release we get one last chance to feel the Force and join the Dark Side. What we discover is one of the most immersive Star Wars experiences ever made



The attention to detail paid to the *Star Wars* universe is really very impressive, from the sound design right down to damage on iconic vehicles in the game.

> "The core of the original Battlefronts, the DNA of them, was the multiplayer"

The Heroes and Villains can really turn a game around if used properly, but they are not invincible. As with many other things in this game, good teamwork will prevail.



OUR LOVE of *Star Wars* is primal. That's the best way we can explain it. This universe reaches down deep into the hearts of those who grew up with it and can be easily triggered with the right visuals or sound effects. It's one of the reasons why *Star Wars Battlefront* has seen such passionate and ferocious advocates and detractors in recent months. We care about this universe and by extension we care very much about this game. We *need* it to be incredible. We *need* it to deliver on the promise of what a game in this universe could be. The weight of expectation is great and it takes a studio with the assurance and demeanour of DICE to keep its cool when all around it appear to be losing their heads.

"I think it all combines into one massive sense of expectation and anticipation, and the pressure that comes therewith," admits senior producer Lina Ingvarsdottir. But DICE remains well suited to this sort of challenge. It's weathered online functionality problems before, it's battled with other triple-A publishers for dominance in the FPS genre. It's exceeded, met and fallen below expectations and, we would argue, has emerged with its reputation intact. There's a base level of quality we expect from DICE, and which the studio expects from itself, and that level is higher than most.

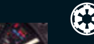
So it's no great surprise as we take the reins of *Battlefront* that the traditional run-and-gun experience feels rock solid from the start. Sure, it's a little strange to be shooting lasers rather than bullets, but the core is there. Team-based FPS combat doesn't need to be too complicated after all. Give both sides a solid array of weapons, offer some customisation options, make sure the vehicles are balanced, design maps with plenty of tactical variety and you've got something functional to build from. From our first steps on Tatooine playing a little co-op Survival mode, we felt at ease in our surroundings and not just because of how well DICE has captured the spirit of this franchise; we'll get to that later.

Survival is perhaps the most intriguing of the modes available from the *Battlefront* beta, seeing as it's the closest thing DICE has included to a solo experience. While better in co-op, it pits you against wave after wave of Imperial

So many ways to celebrate Star Wars

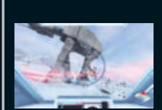
There's more than one way to enjoy the series' return

DISNEY INFINITY 3.0



The latest update to Disney's mega universe of IP brings original and prequel trilogy characters and worlds to the series. Now you can see Luke fight alongside Iron Man and Darth Vader fight with Woody from *Toy Story*.

STAR WARS BATTLE POD



A brand new *Star Wars* arcade experience that takes you from the surface of the Death Star to the forests of Endor, the Battle Pod is an incredible way to experience the intense set pieces of the original trilogy. Available in the UK and US.

BB-8 BY SPHERO



The toy that looks likely to dominate Christmas lists of fans, young and old, the BB-8 Sphero is a perfect confluence of technology and design. By simply adding a head to Sphero's app-controlled ball design, it has an amazing new toy on its hands.

forces, each stronger than the last. We experienced five such waves – although the final game will pit you against 15 – and it didn't prove to be too much of a challenge. Wandering around the spacious map, however, did mean that if we lost sight of a single Stormtrooper we could be hunting them down for a little while to end the wave. Not exactly what this mode was supposed to be about. That said, the gradual ramping up of challenge and the quality of the map design meant that it was a mode that offered plenty of variety. As an introduction to the jet pack and weapons of the Rebels, it's a fine way to ease yourself into DICE's take on the *Battlefront* saga.

Of course, the issue of there being no single-player, while perhaps not a great concern to your average shooter fan, means a great deal to *Star Wars* and specifically *Battlefront* players who consider a narrative-driven adventure integral to the experience. While we might bemoan the lacklustre story modes of *Call Of Duty* and *Battlefield* each year, pondering whether such games really need them at all, there's a strong contingent who, with good reason, feel a *Star Wars* game should have such a mode at its core. For DICE the conclusion appears to have been more that for *Battlefront* to be the best shooter it can be, the concentration of its debut efforts on this series needed to be on multiplayer first and foremost.

"The core of the original *Battlefront*s, the sort of the DNA of them, was the multiplayer, it was a multiplayer experience," says Ingvarsdottir. "And that's very natural for us, but very early on in the conversation we also talked about what we wanted to bring in, and we wanted to bring you these experiences that you can play on the couch with a friend, or you can play by yourself. There's much more than the multiplayer content; the missions, which are a sizeable chunk of the game, are designed with replayability, and with co-op in mind."

PLAYING SURVIVAL on Tatooine we could certainly sense that. Perhaps the communal aspect of this game, significantly augmented by the inclusion of split-screen co-op (something lacking in some other triple-A shooters released this year that we could mention), is something often overlooked in this debate. After all, while the *Battlefront* brand may appear to be well established, DICE is well within its rights and is perhaps creatively responsible for making this title its own. The collection of modes and gameplay types we're left with evidently made more sense this way for the Swedish developer.

"This composition of multiplayer and missions felt like a good package, that was logical together," explains Ingvarsdottir. "I don't think with the original *Battlefront*s you think of them in terms of their standout story campaign, although they had an aspect of that. But for us »



MILLENNIUM FALCON QUAD DRONE

As if remote control droids weren't exciting enough, drone technology comes to everyone's favourite Kessel Running smuggling vessel. This quad design was already popular for consumer drones, but this shell adds plenty of value.

JEDI MASTER LIGHTSABER

Buying yourself a lightsaber is all well and good, but as any young padawan could tell you, it doesn't mean much unless you build the lightsaber for yourself. That's what this kit is all about. Design and build your own weapon.



RISK: STAR WARS EDITION

What we like most about this reinterpretation of *Risk* is that unlike many others it involves a completely new board and tile design. Everyone is going to have to learn some new strategies for taking over the galaxy with your forces.



Star Wars' gifts to gaming

The wonderful characters this universe has brought to the medium

HK-47

The human-hating assassin droid is one of BioWare's great RPG companions in *Knights Of The Old Republic*. He's a regular in our shortlists of greatest supporting characters and great gaming quotes. His dark and dry humour (he's not trying to be funny, we should add) makes him a delight to spend time with.

Bastila Shan

Another star of *Knights Of The Old Republic*, she's at the heart of the story of Darth Revan and the mysteries surrounding the Sith villain. What's more she's also a kickass Jedi and becomes a pretty amazing Jedi master in later years according to some of the extended fiction.

Kyle Katarn

We all love a rogue in the *Star Wars* universe and of all the Han Solo stand-ins we've seen in gaming Kyle Katarn is easily the best. His starring roles in the *Jedi Knight* series made this smuggler an instant star. He started as an Imperial officer, became a smuggler and Rebel and ultimately even trained as a Jedi.

Delta Squad

This crack squad of Republic clone soldiers were sent out to take on some of the toughest missions of the Clone Wars, depicted in *Star Wars: Republic Commando*. They would later become Jedi hunters as part of the Empire given their particular expertise and history. Basically, they're the Spartans of the *Star Wars* gaming world.

Darth Revan

And we're back to *Knights Of The Old Republic* and the mysterious Sith Lord who everyone seems rather terrified of, but has completely disappeared. It's been a while since the game came out, but we won't spoil it. Just let it known that this is one of the best Sith tales you're ever likely to hear.

Prince Xizor

With pheromones that make him attractive and irresistible to everyone, Xizor was the main antagonist of the *Shadows Of The Empire* game on N64 as well as the accompanying novel that details events between *Empire Strikes Back* and *Return Of The Jedi*. It's probably not canon anymore, but he's a great baddie.

that was the concept that we came up with and that's what we pitched."

And there is something clean about this approach. *Star Wars* is a series overflowing with extended universe fiction. Every corner and facet of its galactic reach has been explored and dissected in detail that most will never experience. That *Battlefront* foregoes that right makes it feel less cluttered. It allows *The Force Awakens* to breath a little as this year's definitive *Star Wars* tale and it takes some of the pressure off DICE to deliver a yarn that could match the likes of *Knights Of The Old Republic*. What's more, with so much of the previous fiction culled by the new creative team at Lucasfilm, perhaps a little less added to the pile, concocting reasons for why established characters might meet in various scenarios for example, should be considered a blessing. Do we really need someone else making a mess?

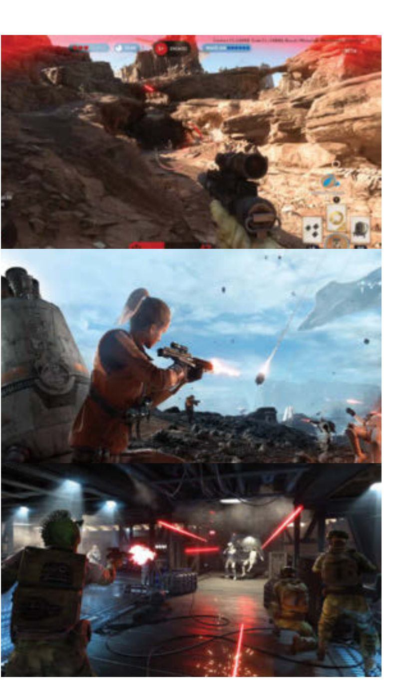
ANOTHER KEY concern has been the approach to dogfighting that *Battlefront* has taken and Ingvarsdottir was happy to meet that head on. While space battles have not been included, she feels that the approach DICE has taken offers a deeper connection to the sense of a wider battle taking place. "One of the things that we wanted to give [those battles] is a sense of three-dimensionality," she says. "We wanted to have starfighters fighting – and they are part of both our Supremacy mode and our Walker Assault mode, so there is a ground-based battle, and a battle in the skies above where starfighters are participating in the battle on the surface of the planet. Fighter Squadron mode is lifting them up a little bit, into the clouds. But we have the power ups basically on the surface of the planet; that's where you swoop down to pick them up, and the environment becomes part of your combat area as well. We feel that this adds quite a lot of variety to the battle, if you will. It's a design decision that we made."

In essence what it allows for us as players to do is impose our own sense of a narrative onto the multiplayer experience, albeit an ephemeral one. After all what sense does a lowly Rebel fighter or grunt Stormtrooper have of the galactic opera taking place in the hearts and minds of their leaders? All they could understand is the immediate danger and drama of a TIE interceptor chasing them down or a Y-wing approaching to take out the AT-AT walkers. That should really be enough to hold attention, and it's only heightened by the presence of vehicles and *Battlefront*'s Heroes and Villains who can arrive to dominate the game. We could tell speaking to Ingvarsdottir that this particular feature is one that the team has found challenging, albeit very exciting.

"That's a tricky one, because when you have a really, really skilled player as a Hero, and they really figure out what to do, they can survive for a while," she explains as we discuss balancing the presence of Luke, Darth Vader and Boba Fett on the battlefield. "And you need to feel rewarded for playing skilfully, but at the same time you cannot become too frustrating for the other players. And I think that's... I mean, we're still iterating on that. You want that fantasy of being as super powerful as Darth Vader, you want to feel like you're really much more than [a normal solider]. And what we've seen happen is that any time someone spawns in as a Hero, they will become a magnet for the opposing force; they become like a mini-boss. Then you have one Hero fighting a few opponents, which makes it feel more balanced."

■ Since the *Star Wars* universe doesn't have a limitless variety of weapons, DICE has applied a little licence to how it breaks down loadouts and classes for the game.

"Stormtroopers seem to gather behind you like ducklings following their mother when you play as Darth Vader"



■ It's important to play the objective rather than spend all your time thinking about your kill count. Blasting at each other will only achieve so much in *Battlefront*.

We had the pleasure of stepping into the boots and breathing apparatus of the intimidating Darth Vader during some Walker Assault action on Hoth and it was fascinating seeing how players would react. On the Imperial side you instantly become a leader. Stormtroopers seem to gather behind you like ducklings following their mother. You are the tip of a freshly sharpened spear and everyone wants to be a part of the action around you. Your entrance to the theatre of battle is only enriched by the Imperial theme ringing out as you respawn as the dark Sith lord too. And then you just start laying waste to the scattered and disorganised Rebel scum. The force choke is gloriously powerful and dominates the lowly grunts quickly while throwing your lightsaber through the air to slice through another soldier is just as satisfying.

PLAYING AS Vader did bring up some interesting thoughts though. For one, should Darth Vader ever be seen running? Watching him dash around Hoth, his cape fluttering behind him, is a rather bizarre sight, but a necessary compromise to the character since spawn points can often leave you some way from the action. It's a complaint that could be made just as comfortably with any of the fighters you embody in the game and frankly a bit of a hangover from DICE's *Battlefield* titles where large maps and vehicles to get you into the action mean a little travelling is no great burden. *Battlefront*'s action, while it shares some of these features, is more immediate. It still has a little more cerebral potency than a *Call Of Duty*, but the action is so cinematic in nature that we found our journey into the heart of the battle to be laboured at times.

On the whole, though, Walker Assault was one of the stronger modes of the beta gameplay we experienced. The attack and defend mechanics of the scenario, activating uplinks to call in the Y-wing bombers on the Rebel side and blocking that attempt to get the AT-ATs in position on the Imperial side leads to some nice back and forth gameplay. The balance of the match can turn quickly, with each side rallying and causing some panic in the opposing team. Having Luke Skywalker or Darth Vader show up only heightens that excitement and fervour.

It was also a mode where the differences between DICE shooter behaviour and other shooters really begins to show. You have to play the objective in Walker Assault or you will be decimated. Even playing as we were with members of the press and seasoned gamers, it took a DICE developer to step in and remind a few that simply shooting at each other wasn't going to win their team the round. This is objective-based gameplay in the DICE tradition and, as such, points of control need to be respected.

It was a line of thinking a little easier to follow for some when playing Dropzone on Sullust, the lava and molten rock-encrusted planet you've seen in art and screens. This point control mode is a far more traditional team-based game and as such everyone took to it far more comfortably. It's classic king of the hill with eight versus eight and plenty of action to go around. What's more, the previously unseen but often mentioned planet of Sullust offers a unique location to explore. It's a good example of DICE not only bringing its gaming experience to bear on the title, but also embellishing the universe with its own take on things.

In particular we were interested, given *Battlefield*'s wide array of weapons, classes and customisations, in how DICE »

"There are a cluster of scorch marks on the Millennium Falcon that exactly represent the way it looks in the movie"

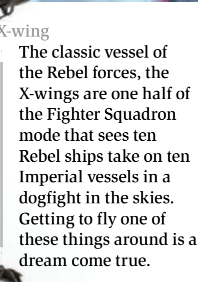
■ Most of the game is set between *A New Hope* and *The Empire Strikes Back*, but the *Battle Of Jakku* launch DLC is actually set just after *Return Of The Jedi* with possible implications for *The Force Awakens*.

went about working within the more rigid framework of *Star Wars* and how much of itself went into making the game more FPS-friendly. "In the levels you find these icons that give you power-ups, and some of those are something that you recognise, such as an orbital strike," explains Ingvarsdottir. "But then we had to invent our own as well, to complement the rest, where we felt like 'Okay, *Star Wars* really doesn't have that class of weapon and we need it in the game.' Like some of the turrets that we have, and what have you. So we have made additions to the arsenal in order to satisfy the design needs."

But perhaps what is most impressive, for all that *Battlefront* adds to the *Star Wars* fiction and has moulded it to fit with DICE's own strengths, is that it feels completely and utterly like a *Star Wars* experience. The level of detail, the small references, the inclusion of information and objects only half-referenced, like the planet of Sullust itself, is incredible. You only need to watch a couple of *Battlefront* trailers and hear the blasters firing or the sound of an X-wing flying overhead to tell this is something really quite amazing. Since the DICE team was given the chance to explore and interact with many items in its visits to Lucasfilm, we asked Ingvarsdottir if she could tell us about any other small elements that might go unnoticed that the team has managed to get into the game. "I think there are a million of those," she reveals. "The level of detail of some of the assets is stunning. You know, I think if you were to look at our Falcon model as an example, you would find that there are a cluster of scorch marks on it that exactly represent the way it looks in the movie. It's these little details that it needs to have in order for it to feel authentic. And I think that goes for many other items in the game."

Some of it is purely aesthetic, of course, with all of the blaster designs and armour looking like they came straight off the set of George Lucas' original trilogy and even new additions from DICE feel as if they've been created with original concepts in mind, but what really brings the *Battlefront* experience together is the audio.

Vehicular warfare



X-wing

The classic vessel of the Rebel forces, the X-wings are one half of the Fighter Squadron mode that sees ten Rebel ships take on ten Imperial vessels in a dogfight in the skies. Getting to fly one of these things around is a dream come true.



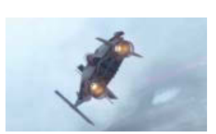
Snow speeder

We all know what these well-loved ships are; it's not every vehicle that can single-handedly take down a AT-AT walker, after all. We expect them to be limited to the snowy battlefields of Hoth, but that will only make them more special.



Millennium Falcon

Oh, what a glorious thing it will be to fly this little beauty through the skies. The Millennium Falcon is essentially a Hero vehicle, playing a similar role to Luke Skywalker or Darth Vader in the ground-based game.



A-wing

This is the speed-freak of the Rebel hangar, offering superior acceleration in the skies and hopefully a little more manoeuvrability than you might get from alternative ships. In the movie universe it was even faster than the TIE interceptor.



TIE fighter

In *Battlefront*, these ships control identically to the X-wing, meaning that they are equal opponents in the Fighter Squadron mode. It makes a lot of sense, even if it doesn't reflect the movie universe mechanics of the two craft.

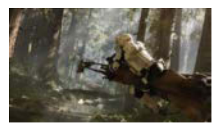
We don't often go on about sound design in the games we play, but with *Star Wars Battlefront* it comes up again and again. Everything sounds superb, from explosions and vehicles to the score. It really leaves one very obvious question to ask: how did DICE do it?

"By having probably one of the best audio teams in the world that also has the privilege of having the John Williams music at their disposal, and all of the original sound stems from the movies," reveals Ingvarsdottir. "*Battlefield* has been known for its stellar audio, and the sound team are as much *Star Wars* geeks as everyone else on the team. One of the first presentations we did in a team meeting was our audio director Ben Minto. He did a presentation on The Sounds of *Star Wars*, and he explained things like... did you know that the sound of the TIE fighter is actually the scream from an elephant that has been modulated into the sound of a TIE fighter? And many of the sounds are actually modified sounds from animals, or everyday items that are used in odd ways to get those sounds. So in the same way that our artists have geeked out about bringing the visuals to life, the sound guys have done the same with the audio."

THE RESULT is a soundscape that completely and immediately immerses you in this universe. It's all so familiar and ingrained in our minds that with one note of score and one click of a weapon we're instantly transported to another galaxy, far, far away. For all that the makers of *Battlefield* may have brought some of their own expertise and preferences to this classic game series, they have also fully embraced the fiction and the trappings of what really makes something a quintessentially *Star Wars* game. By being true to that, if perhaps not to everything else, DICE has managed to harness a very powerful sense of familiarity.

This is *Star Wars Battlefront* for the masses. DICE has built a game that will appeal to the broadest possible range of *Star Wars* fans, rather than doubling down on the *Battlefront* fanbase alone. What that means is that it may not be as clinical and multi-faceted as legacy players might have wanted, but it remains the most immersive *Star Wars* experience we've ever had the pleasure of being a part of. It may not be mechanically perfect or groundbreaking, but atmospherically and emotionally it promises to be one of the most extraordinary games followers of the Force have ever had the good fortune to play. The beta brings up a lot of interesting questions and issues – many of which will hopefully be tweaked and fixed in the weeks to come – but the biggest impression it left was that we just wanted to jump right back in.

New Heroes and Villains are expected to be revealed ahead of release and may well be launched as DLC support in the coming months as well.



Speeder bike
Another fan favourite from the original trilogy, you'll find the Speeders available to you on the forest moon of Endor, allowing for some interesting and exhilarating high-speed battles between the trees. Good luck trying not to crash.



AT-ST
One of the more menacing vehicles you can expect to pilot in the game, they can be taken out by ground troops with concerted effort or the right gear, but that doesn't mean staring down the barrel of its cannons won't terrify most.



TIE interceptor
The Empire's fastest craft, you can expect this ship to be a worthy adversary to Rebel X-wings in Fighter Squadron mode, so long as you can pilot them worth a damn. The nimble and clinical will likely do well at the controls here.



PREPARE TO DIE

DARK SOULS HAS ACCUMULATED A CULT – A CULT OF GAMERS THAT LOVE A CHALLENGE, LOVE TO DIE, LOVE TO BE TESTED. WE THREW OURSELVES, AGAIN AND AGAIN, AGAINST THE OBSTACLES OF **DARK SOULS III** TO SEE IF IT'S AS CRUEL AS OTHER GAMES IN THE SERIES... IT IS





The sky looks like it's dying. The sun looks sick, its light poisonous in the air. There's an ashy quality to everything, like the core of the earth is burning itself out. There's misery in the heavy stone of the buildings that pick at the skies above us, buildings whose spires are dilapidated, void of life. This is *Dark Souls* all right, and we're about to die.

We're in a courtyard, outside a huge double door leading into some kind of cathedral. This courtyard wouldn't look out of place in Barcelona or Madrid – well, it wouldn't if there had been some sort of awful cataclysm, anyway – and the wrought iron fences and intricate stonework almost lull you into a false sense of security. Almost. It's the two advancing, mechanically animated knights that are moving towards us that break the courtyard's thrall.

One of them, armed with shield and sword, comes at us quickly. He goes in for a heavy attack and we step back – a lot quicker and more nimbly than we would have done in *Dark Souls II*. It's satisfying, but as ever in one of these encounters, that satisfaction doesn't last long – the partner knight pokes us with a spear. It doesn't do a *lot* of damage – nothing a quick swig from our Estus Flask won't fix – but it broke us out of our heavy attack, so now we're back at square one.

We could just run past these two sentinels, but that feels disingenuous to *Dark Souls* – aren't we supposed to be this lone warrior, this agent of light, out to eradicate evil from the world? Aren't we supposed to praise the sun, quell the waves of darkness that are preventing the land from breathing? To run past these henchmen (or hench*things*) would be a disservice to the rich lore *Dark Souls* has so painstakingly worked to craft.

So. We've been poked, we're vulnerable, and we're running low on precious Estus (thanks to some sort of undead cavalier that almost executed us in a garden). The sword-bearer comes

"We step back more nimbly than we would have done in Dark Souls II. It's satisfying, but that satisfaction doesn't last long"

The dragons that lie around the world of *Dark Souls III* hint at some of the game's rich (and hidden) lore. NPC peasants both worship and fear the beasts.

New enemy affinities mean there are unique afflictions you can suffer from – we got frostbitten, for example; an ice-based debuff that drains your stamina.

at us again with a one-two-three dance of attacks. We take the two on our shield and try and roll away from the third. That was a mistake: we got complacent, and the sword-bearer hits us, then tackles us with its shield, then its spear-wielding friend lances us through the side. 'YOU DIED'.

Back to the bonfire, then. At least it's a moment of respite in an otherwise relentless world that seems more concerned with depressing you than with killing you for good. Thinking about our next move (and what we're going to equip), we stare at the bonfire. It looks nice – the fire looks much better than it has in other *Dark Souls* experiences, and licks at the wood with a pallid, sickly kind of light.

That's fitting for *Dark Souls III*. This game seems to revolve around fire – the first glimpse we all had into the world of *Dark Souls III* showed an entity known only as The Lord Of Cinder arising. For laymen, this lord was basically a giant – a goliath you're only going to be given a slingshot to defeat. But fire rears its head elsewhere, too: the (in)famous bonfires that track your progress seem to be as common as they were in *Dark Souls* – none of that progress-checking *Scholar Of The First Sin* support here. Rest stops are sparse. They are meant to relieve tension, not be a crutch. There's a school of human psychology that attaches feelings of safety and security to open flames. You feel that in *Dark Souls*. Bonfires call you home. Bonfires are sanctuary, anathema from the rest of this grim place.

But fire is also destructive. It's no secret that *Dark Souls* auteur Hidetaka Miyazaki takes a *lot* of creative inspiration from European architecture, folklore and history, and it seems that our esteemed mythologies aren't safe from his dark interpretations, either. In our Christo-Judaic myths, Lucifer 'the bearer of light' fell from the heavens to feed the flames of hell – flames that burn without consuming. That, really, is *Dark Souls* in its essence: you never really die, but the game feeds on your misery. Nothing is ever lost, but you provide the world with a reason to keep on going: to kill you.

We draw the allusion to Lucifer because that kind of angelic tragedy seems rife in *Dark Souls III* – the populous of the world are all emaciated, cowering, faces upturned to this poisoned sun. They're praising the light, certainly, but they seem to be willing it to live, rather than begging for its mercy. Miyazaki has stated that *Dark Souls III* is the end – ambiguous as he's wont to be, we don't think that means the end of the franchise (it's too iconic for that to happen now), we think that's about the world.

Dark Souls and *Dark Souls II* are connected, but only by nerve-thin threads of consistent lore, mechanics and to a lesser degree, place. *Dark Souls III* seems to continue that – spiritually linked to the past games, but set in a different world or continent or place entirely. There are dragons living here – yes, *living* – and their fire is as deadly to you as it is to the mobs of enemies that wait for you. On our way to the fat cavalier mini-boss that stood in our way before the Dancer of the Frigid Valley (the *real* boss), we passed »

A Light In The Black

New to Souls? Then let games™ give you some helpful pointers about how to survive the longest night(s) of your life

Carry spares

If you walk into an area and you're not prepared, you could find yourself breaking your favourite weapon (because Miyazaki is changing up how durability works for this game). Always go prepared – if you're only good with swords, bring more swords.

Don't jump



We were playing through one demo area and we died a *lot* because we were trying to rush down to that boss area. So, in *Dark Souls*, just don't jump (or fall). It's not worth it. Just get on the ladders and go at your own pace. You don't want to sacrifice your health on something so paltry.

Run!



If you're having trouble with a boss, and you're always arriving a bit beaten up, don't be afraid of running through mobs. There's a new enemy type in *Dark Souls III* that seems to explode with living tentacle-oil-stuff, and we killed it a few times… but didn't mind just running past it after we realised *it was awful*.

Relight your fire(s)



Make sure to rest at bonfires whenever you pass them. Other than cashing your souls in, the fires replenish your Estus and give you a chance for a quick psychological break. Also, enemies don't de-spawn in *Dark Souls III*, so never worry about killing the same enemies until they die *forever*.

a dragon that was perched on the edge of some crenelated battlements, watching his kingdom beneath. It spotted us and spat a corridor of flame – we dexterously avoided it, and it set the enemies/environment ablaze instead. What we wrote earlier about the hellfire that burns without consumption? It kind of justifies the way the virtual fire clings to the walls, stones and props without blackening them. In other games, this would look jarring. In *Dark Souls*, it's unnerving.

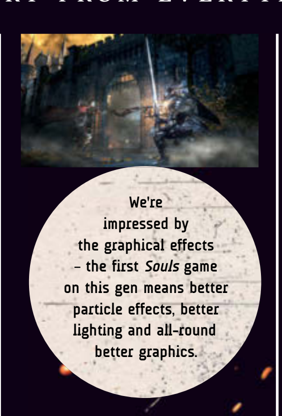
Get hit by the fire and you'll take *a lot* of damage over time. We found that out because, as we fought through the level (*finally* putting those sentinel knights to bed), we came upon *Dark Souls III*'s first revealed boss; the Dancer of the Frigid Valley. The second you see this tragic maiden – very Havisham in her execution – you begin to appreciate the graphical upgrades the first current-gen *Souls* game has received. Aside from the flowing bridal gear she's wearing, she's also wielding two swords – one made of fire, one made of something gloopier, something darker, oilier.

The fire area of effect attacks the Dancer reeled off knocked us back and set us alight. Our instinct was to roll this off, and it seemed to work to get the flames to subside. But the Dancer, her nose filled with the smell of our charred flesh, rounded on us, slammed her flame sword into our back and broke our spine against the glorious Renaissance-inspired floor tiles. Dead.

So we respawn at one of the preciously sparse campfires up on the ramparts of the castle – we're supposed to make it back down to the Dancer's chamber again. Luckily, we found (and activated) a lift last time we were down there, so now we can just run through the guards, past some mobs, and straight into



"MAGIC IS PROBABLY THE BIGGEST DIFFERENCE FROM PREVIOUS SOULS GAMES. MIYAZAKI AND HIS STUDIO WERE CONCERNED WITH MAKING THE SPELLS FEEL A WORLD APART FROM EVERYTHING ELSE"



We're impressed by the graphical effects – the first *Souls* game on this gen means better particle effects, better lighting and all-round better graphics.

her clutches again. This is *Dark Souls* map design as it should be – with all the world-building grandeur of the second game, but with the modular progression and sensible path-finding of the first. *Dark Souls III* is a nightmare to navigate, but we imagine that's music to the ears of the series' masochist fans.

We went back to the Dancer, this time at full health, full Estus and full motivation. We stood back though, and looked at our build – while there isn't a 'Soul Vessel' item returning from past games, we were assured that there will be a way for you to reallocate your Souls at will. This means you'll be able to change your build to ensure you have the right skills for the right area.

That in mind, we went for the Scholar – a magic user. Magic is probably the biggest difference from previous *Souls* games. Miyazaki and his studio were concerned with making the spells feel a world apart from everything else; making sure each felt like more than an extension of a weapon. The result? Magic gives you more strategic options, opening up new avenues of evasion-into-killing, letting you ambush, letting you *kill*.

It's actually magic that made us realise how different this is to Miyazaki's last game – *Bloodborne*. Where *Bloodborne* is character action to the bone, the Souls series has always revolved more around the RPG side of things. Your build is vital to progression, character growth tells its own narrative of survival in this bleak world. *Bloodborne* was a more reflex-ready action game, not to its discredit – it was phenomenal, but *Souls* is a slower game. More deliberate, more cautious.

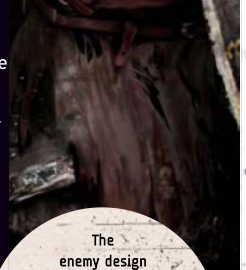
To that end, magic usage ties in with the new battle arts system: each weapon can be used in a specialised way,

depending on what you have equipped. During our playthough, we found a pair of scimitars, for example. When equipped to both hands, hitting triangle (or Y) made our character spin with a brief recovery window at the end. This was great for crowd control, but it's a gamble – mistime it and you're left open in the middle of an enemy mob, and you'll die. The greatsword's battle art is a launcher that dishes out *huge* damage to the enemy, but leaves you vulnerable and eats up your stamina. It's worth noting these arts won't be a crutch you can rely on during boss fights or spam to get through: that's never how *Dark Souls* has worked. They exist only to give you one more option in your toolbox. If anything, it means the game is looking for *more* from you to make up for these new tricks you've been given. Read: *Dark Souls III* could be the hardest in the series to date.

So we set ourselves up with magic and went in to face the Dancer: hopefully for the final time. Previously, magic was only usable on a 'charge' basis that would refresh at bonfires. Now, there's an MP bar – or something similar – that can be refilled with Ash Estus, from a flask upgradable like your regular Estus, similar to the *Demon's Souls* setup. This means as long as you manage your inventory well, and find time to replenish, you'll be able to continually cast magic and clear enemies from a distance.

We lunged electric spear after electric spear at the Dancer. We shocked her with bolts of holy light. We disappeared behind pillars to cast healing spells on ourselves and then went in at the back to smack the huge monstrosity with our staff. Eventually she went down, and we watched her cry to the skies as her soul was collected. *Dark Souls* has always revolved around tragedy and death, and despite the triumph you feel when you bring something this monstrous down, you can't help feel a pang of pity. When something dies so elaborately before you, you can't help but feel that *you* have the blackest soul of all.

We left *Dark Souls III* feeling pretty depressed. We died a lot, and when we finally finished our goal, we left naught but a trail of destruction behind us. Yes, we got to know the new weapons, yes, we saw this dying world, and yes, we put a demented Dickensian villain out of her misery, but it only made us feel worse. This was a true *Dark Souls* experience: it managed to break our mood in no more than three hours. When we stepped back out into the real world, it took us a while to readjust – to understand that not everything around us was withering and falling to ash. Praise the sun, indeed.



The enemy design in the game remains as unsettling and upsetting as ever before. Everything is emaciated, dead or dying, suffering or crying. It all adds to the tone.

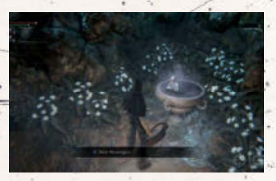




Dark Souls VS Bloodborne

Miyazaki's last game was certainly a departure from the Souls games, but doubters take note: there's none of Bloodborne's blood in Dark Souls III's veins

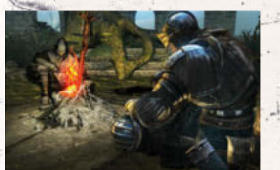


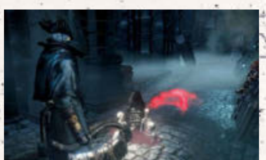


Fast Travel

Dark Souls
Dark Souls III will let you use fast travel from the start of the game (like *Dark Souls II*), but Miyazaki listened to the *Dark Souls* purists and won't let the system affect the level design.

Bloodborne
The PS4 exclusive dealt with the issue of fast travel by making you go through the Hunter's Dream to activate lanterns – making that area more of a central 'hub'. *Dark Souls* won't be doing this.

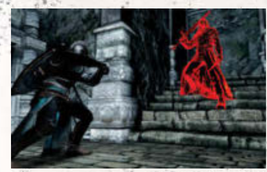




New Game+

Dark Souls
Once you finish the game, your items, weapons and armour carry over to the new game and, like *Scholar Of The First Sin*, enemy placements, weapon drops and items will be altered.

Bloodborne
...but, like in *Bloodborne*, you won't be able to use bonfire ascetics, so you can't trick the game into giving you extra loot, or keep grinding one boss to harvest as many souls as you need.





Invasion

Dark Souls
This game will retain the summoning/invasion mechanics that were used in the first two titles (and that have since gone on to influence many other games... *Dying Light*, *Resi 6* etc).

Bloodborne
The Bell system won't be carried over from *Bloodborne* – but you *also* won't be using Cracked Red Orbs, like in other *Souls* games: there's *no* consumable tied to invasion now.





Re-specialisation

Dark Souls
There's not going to be any kind of 'Soul Vessel' item here, but there *will* be a way to reassign your stat points at some juncture. If that's via some sort of special vendor or a key item, we're yet to discover.

Bloodborne
Once you pick a class in *Bloodborne*, you're locked in – so watch how you spend those Blood Echoes. It was a sore point for *Souls* fans, so we're glad *Dark Souls III* retains its RPG centre.



THE SPOILS OF MARTIAL LAW

THE DIVISION IS MORE THAN A GAME – IT'S UBISOFT'S VISION OF A BLEAK, POSTHUMAN WORLD

WE SPOKE TO MARTIN HULTBERG – THE DIVISION'S IP DEVELOPER – ABOUT WHERE THE GAME CAME FROM, AND WHAT IT SAYS ABOUT US…

We're scrambling over a broken chain-link fence and you can hear us grunting beneath our gas mask. Our urban camouflage – that is, a backpack and a leather jacket – feels distressingly lacking right now; we can see another group of survivors clambering over debris across the street from us. They're armed, we know that – why the hell would you be out here if you *weren't*? – and they're coming in fast. We kneel down behind a crumbling concrete barrier and (for the fifth time) make sure our gun is loaded. It is. We're ready.

The rest of our crew forms up on us. They hunker down, too – you can't rush this, it's not worth it – and we're all silent. There's a guy at the back, the fourth and smallest member of our crew and he quietly sends out a radar ping. It returns with nothing. Damn it, the others have moved on.

"They're after the cargo themselves," says one of our teammates. "They're not just defending it." With this revelation comes a sudden change in the atmosphere – we thought those skittish patrols we saw earlier were AI-controlled; cannon fodder Cleaners that might have been deployed to interfere with our objectives. But no, they were other people. *Sentient* people – as eager for supplies as we are. That's how things go down in these Dark Zones – it's every survivor for themselves and that goes for AI and the likes of you or us. This isn't just a little skirmish anymore. This is war.

We take the lead – the other players tight on our tail – hopping from cover to cover. You glue to cover fairly naturally and everything is intuitive. It has to be – this game is about tension. You don't want to be fiddling around trying to duck down behind some »



"THE DIVISION IS BASED ON A REAL THREAT, A CLEAR AND PRESENT DANGER TO OUR SOCIETY"

fallen embankment somewhere and get a bullet through your dome – that'd be a disservice to what Massive is doing with this concrete wasteland that actively bears down on you.

Anyway, we digress. One of our guys hanging back spies the crate we're supposed to extract in the centre of a fortified courtyard. The bodies lying around, slick with fresh blood, indicate we're not the first ones here. The AI Cleaners have been put down and someone else too.

A flare goes off. "Move, move!" a teammate shouts down my ear. She's got a shotgun and rushes in first. We climb up some shipping palettes covered in tarp and take aim with our rifle. There's no scope view on it – something we'd really prefer – but the zooming works satisfactorily for what it is. We manage to staccato fire three headshots and we take down one of the enemy faction. Through our viewfinder, we see *another* team of survivors lobbing grenades from the other side. "Perfect," we think, "we got these guys flanked."

This other group swoops in, *fast*. They execute another enemy we kneecapped and splinter off, searching for stragglers. We notice they got pretty chewed up in the crossfire. It's everyone for themself, right? "Shall we?" we whisper to our teammates. We, with three survivors (we're waiting on our shotgun user to respawn) position ourselves with the cargo in sight. The small radar guy is cooking a grenade. The new team steps in to try and extract the package and we rain death on them. An alert pings across our HUD – we've 'gone rogue' now – and we're identified as enemies to any humans that come near us. No better than Cleaners to anyone that dares get in our way. But to hell with the risks – we've got this extraction locked down now.





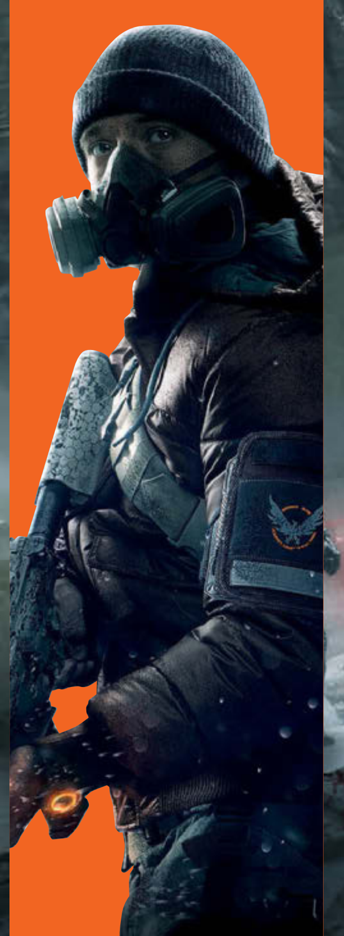


THE TRUE COST OF BLACK FRIDAY

ONE OF THE most celebrated days in any shoppers' year, Black Friday is regarded as the last Friday in any November. It's seen by many as the beginning of the Christmas shopping season... And since 2008 it's come with casualties.



7 DEATHS | 98 INJURIES



There's a helicopter on the way, all we've got to do is hold out for about a minute, and then we can scarper with some of the best loot in the game.

The Division is gunning for *Destiny*. There's no doubt about that. It wants to dethrone Bungie and Activision's shared-world FPS and it's not shy about it. In fact, it seems to us like *The Division* is outright trying to snare *Destiny*'s players – the loot system, the mixed player-versus-player and player-versus-enemy game types, the asynchronous world, and even the story all share something in common with *Destiny*. Thing is, where Bungie's effort talks in grandiose, medieval sci-fi language, *The Division* takes pains to be more domestic – grittier, darker, harder.

"The fact that our scenario is grounded in reality, an actual 'what if' scenario, sets us apart from most other games," explains Martin Hultberg – the IP developer for Massive and Ubisoft and *The Division*. He's the driving force behind giving *The Division* its identity – and the best person we could talk to after our hands-on. "We have no aliens, no zombies or strange monsters running about. *The Division* is based on a real threat, a clear and present danger to our society." That's a long way from a floating sphere and a handful of alien races after your light, right?

"NOBODY CAN BE TRUSTED IN THE DARK ZONES"

That's one of the things that has kept us interested in *The Division*, despite its numerous delays and the relatively slow drip-feed of information that's been coming from Ubisoft. We're being subjected to countless apocalypse narratives at the moment, but *The Division*'s approach to it all is more cynical, more self-reflective.

"Mankind has always been fascinated by disasters and the end times, since as far back as we have recorded history," explains Hultberg. "[The end] is in religious texts, it is told as legends... Severe disasters are historic fact and there are countless books on the subject. Humans are set apart from other animals in that we can see patterns over time, we can speculate and we can theorise. It is probably part of human nature – to speculate on the subject of our own demise."

So how does Ubisoft apply these patterns, this grim fascination with our own end, in a videogame? A place where death, really, is insignificant. We craftily edited out the times we died in that introductory retelling of our experience with *The Division*, because it takes away from the drama, but we died twice during our excursion. Thing is, we gloss over that, because we're gamers: death is inevitable, death is inconsequential.

Making death relevant in a game goes further than that – it seems to us you have to focus less on the intimacy of death and more on its broader implications. You must think about the societal, the philosophical, the idea of death as a reset button, the birth of the post-human, the idea of being victims *around* death, but not *of* it.

So that's another area *The Division* is diverting from its peers – it's focusing on the very culture that helps fuel the game: consumerism. The disease that wipes out



The Division's UI is interesting: the way it overlays over the environment means you're never missing out on real-time events.



THE REALITY OF THE SITUATION

THE DIVISION ITSELF ISN'T ENTIRELY FICTION – IT'S MORE SPECULATIVE FICTION: A STORY WRITTEN ABOUT WHAT WOULD HAPPEN IF CERTAIN REAL-WORLD SCENARIOS ACTUALLY OCCURRED…

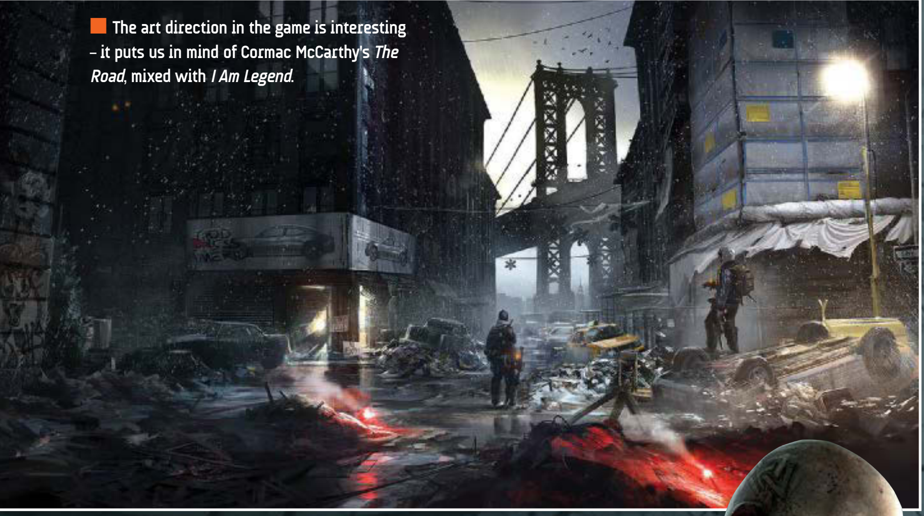
DIRECTIVE 51

SHORT FOR 'NATIONAL Security Presidential Directive NSPD 51/ Homeland Security Presidential Directive HSPD-20', Directive 51 is a Presidential Directive, which claims power to undertake actions that would "continue the federal Governement" in the wake of "catastrophic events". How's that classified? Well, apparently any "incident, regardless of location, that results in extraordinary levels of mass casualties, damage or disruption severely affecting the U.S population, infrastructure, environment, economy or government function" classifies for the initiation of the directive, so it's actually a more viable likelihood than you might have first thought…

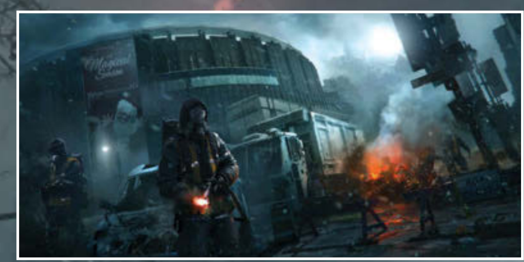
THE DARK WINTER EXERCISE

OPERATION DARK WINTER was a bio-terrorist attack simulation that ran in the US in 2001. The test focused on evaluating the inadequacies of a national emergency response if the US was confronted with a smallpox attack, but in the end it identified a lot of issues with what's wrong with US health infrastructure, how the media would react, and how the government would crumble. All of this has been ingeniously added to *The Division*'s core game experience.

The cover mechanics work quite well: they make the whole game feel a little like *Metal Gear Destiny*.


The art direction in the game is interesting – it puts us in mind of Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*, mixed with *I Am Legend*.





the vast majority of the population spreads on Black Friday. It's spread via banknotes, too. The whole message would in danger of being delivered in a borderline Banksy way, if it weren't for the fact this side of the narrative will only be the backdrop to the tribalistic human-versus-human element the main game will go on to explore.

"There certainly is a thought in *The Division* about modern society," Hultberg explains. "When we started looking at footage from Black Friday sales and viewed that next to footage from food riots in disaster areas around the world – there was an eerie resemblance in how people acted. There are reports of fights breaking out over game controllers on discount in the Christmas shopping frenzy. It's crazy."

Suddenly our mad scramble to get to those crates of weapons and that oh-so-important loot doesn't feel so innocuous. Now that parallel's been drawn, it's interesting to reflect on the other players that were sat around us as our fireteam encroached on that crate. "Kill them, kill them!" we heard one frenzied teen shout to his colleagues, then there's our own betrayal, too.

Maybe *The Division*'s loot cycle is going to be more than just an RNG grind, a la *Destiny*... Maybe it's actually going to give some human weight to the way we, as gamers, approach looting. Will we kill as many people as possible to try and horde the best gear for ourselves, or will we give other players the benefit of the doubt and reduce our own odds of getting the good stuff in order to share?

Remember: you're not anyone's enemy in *The Division* until you've pulled the trigger.

"Nobody can be trusted in the Dark Zones," explains Hultberg, "so tensions and risks are high, but so are the rewards." The Dark Zones themselves don't take over the whole game – they're confined to certain areas of the map. "The setup allows you a seamless transition between solo, co-op and player verses player. This means no lobbies or menus – it is just one unbroken experience once you start the game. The world consists of areas that facilitate these different ways of playing and you will know, and choose, when you make the transition from one to another."

We've played this game under the close eye of Ubisoft and Massive – in massively predetermined states. Despite that, we saw friend turn on friend. We saw people stab each other in the back for loot that they wouldn't even get to keep on their character. When *The Division* is released, we're intrigued to see just how badly humanity will turn on itself; there's an argument to be made that *The Division* is as much a social experiment as it is a game.

GOING VIRAL

VIDEOGAMES HAVE HAD A LONG HISTORY OF USING DISEASES TO THEIR ADVANTAGE – WE'VE COLLECTED SOME OF THE MORE INTERESTING CASES



THE PLAGUE
THE WITCHER 3: WILD HUNT

IF YOU MESS UP the A Tower Of Mice mission in *The Witcher III*, you can unleash a plague maiden on the world, carrying with it a plague that'll actively affect the world around you as you progress. That'll teach Geralt to meddle in the affairs of others.



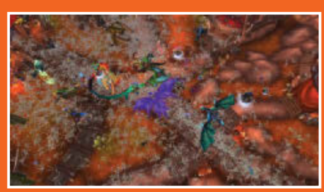
POKÉRUS
POKÉMON SERIES

ACTUALLY A BENEFICIAL virus that's said to come from space (or something), Pokérus can infect *Pokémon* in your party and spread to all the others you own. It helps you level up quicker – doubling the effect of the hidden EV values of your monsters



BLOATY HEADS
THEME HOSPITAL

NOT SO MUCH a national pandemic as a general illness that affects the population... Until you get to a certain level where apparently *everyone* has a Bloaty Head. You have to keep your deflation machine in working order as you pop many, many heads...



CORRUPTED BLOOD
WORLD OF WARCRAFT

WHAT WAS INTENDED to be a local debuff in a boss fight actually spread through the entire world of Azeroth via a bug, killing off low-level players. The ramifications were studied by sociologists, who applied the in-game panic to a real-life simulation.


XBOX 360

10 YEARS OF XBOX 360

J Allard reflects on a decade of Xbox 360 as we celebrate its contribution to the games industry

As chief experience officer and chief technology officer of Microsoft's consumer products division, J Allard oversaw the launches of the Xbox, Xbox 360 and Zune, but ended his 19 year run at the company in 2010. Since then Allard moved to Portland, Oregon where he launched a bike security start-up called 529 Garage. Having been such an influential figure in the creation and design of the Xbox 360 back in 2005, it seemed only right to sit with him now to get his thoughts on the impact Microsoft's second generation of hardware had on the industry and how some of its most iconic ideas came about.



J Allard worked at Microsoft for 19 years.

Could you tell is a little about your specific role during the planning for the Xbox 360?

I had two different jobs on the project. The first role didn't have a formal title, but I was essentially the choreographer of the strategy for the overall program. In order to design a successful ten-year business and product, we not only needed to tap into the best minds across the team, but we also needed to get everyone on the same page. When you have thousands of people working to launch a ten-year program, it's essential that everyone understands their role and is working towards the same goals. I spent a huge amount of time at the beginning of the program with all of the different teams, leaders and disciplines helping to synthesise the best ideas into a singular vision – and then, infusing that single vision into the culture. I think we executed the 360 program in about half the time that Sony spent on PS3. Because of all of the up front planning and clarity of our vision, we didn't press Undo very much in execution and we were able to just charge ahead. »

The second role was as senior vice president of the Xbox platform, which entailed managing the design, development and deployment of the console, accessories, hardware, developer kit and Xbox Live. Basically, I was on the hook for building the thing, getting it done on time and making sure it was within budget and did what we said it would do – both for gamers and game developers.

Combined, these jobs meant I played the keeper of the big picture, and the leader responsible for sweating the details and making sure it performed. It was a terrific job and I got to work with an amazing team that had deep domain knowledge in all of the key disciplines to turn the big dream into an on-time reality. In terms of guiding hard decisions, I always tried to put the gamer first and would, again and again, ask hard questions like "Are we loading games fast enough?," "Is the latency of the controller imperceivable?," "Is this the best possible controller layout for FPS games?"



The 360 gamepad design was explored through dozens of prototypes, which as it turns out was more or less Microsoft's approach to the console as a whole.

With the Xbox 360 being Microsoft's second console, what sort of targets did you set yourselves?
Clear ones, that all fit on a single page. From a business point of view, we had a few simple goals. First was to be first to market by shipping in 2005 in all three major markets. Next was to balance the system costs and our expenses in a way that at 50 million consoles we'd hit a specific profitability target. Finally, it was to exceed ten million Xbox Live subscribers in the first five years.

> "I always tried to put the gamer first and would, again and again, ask hard questions"

From an experience point of view, we wanted to deliver a console that really delivered on the potential of online and that felt incomplete if you were offline. We wanted the console to be as simple, reliable and responsive as any consumer electronics product. And, we wanted the gaming experience to not just be "last generation with better graphics," but fundamentally richer gameplay with online multiplayer, leaderboards, achievements, awesome wireless, downloadable content and a high integrity online experience that was able to address cheating, grievers and bullies.

From a technology point-of-view, we wanted to deliver PS3 performance a year ahead of Sony with an easier-to-program development environment, an online service that could scale to ten's of millions of gamers and a flawless wireless experience with a cost basis that would allow us to drop price to reach a broader audience in the later years of the program.

What were the key design challenges you faced?
The hardest part of the console business is that you're designing a product in 2002, that doesn't ship until 2005 and needs to last until 2015 as a viable consumer electronics product. There are very, very few categories like game consoles in any industry. Most consumer hardware products try and keep the price the same and add features and performance each year to keep demand high. In the console world, you keep the performance the same, but drive the price down so that it is more affordable to more people and you have more sockets for game publishers to target. When you couple that with a firm budget, a target date and a competitor that's been building consumer electronics for over a century, it puts an incredible amount of pressure on the team to make the right hardware choices. Another difficult design challenge was making the transition from the Intel chipset to a more custom chipset – the PPC core and embedded DRAM – to increase performance and reduce costs. Those choices had huge ripple effects throughout the program on the operating system, our testing, our development tools.

Since it was our second console, improving Xbox Live and making it work across both the original Xbox and Xbox 360 was very interesting to navigate. We had barely launched Xbox Live and were still learning how to operate such a massive service when we had to start doing Xbox 360 features and keep the thing running and transition gamers as they upgraded to 360. I think the team did a stellar job on that one in particular.

Probably the other top challenge I think about was the idea that we would have the system visor that would allow for some common UI and services (like seeing a game's achievements, notifications and soundtracks) to be activated in context of any game. That was a tough technical and experiential challenge, but also a tough one politically with game developers since they wanted all of the system resources for their experience. It was a difficult balancing act, but I think the team got it right.

What do you consider its greatest contribution to the gaming world?
I think when we took calculated risks, sweated the details and persevered through the scepticism to hold to our vision is when we contributed the most to the industry.

Xbox Live was the biggest example. We had the belief from the beginning that online was the next key inflection point for the industry and that no one else in the console market really shared that vision, or had the right experience to bring that to life. I think 15 years later, it's become pretty clear that we were correct in that, and frankly I'm shocked at how weakly most

The 360 in numbers

A few quick stats to remind you of the second Xbox's success

84.94 million Xbox 360 consoles sold worldwide

24.65 million Xbox consoles sold worldwide

Only **1.66 million** Xbox 360s sold in Japan

1,277 Xbox 360 games available on Xbox Live store

636 Arcade games available on Xbox Live store

3,363 Indie games available on Xbox Live store

24 million Xbox 360 Kinect units sold by February 2013

HOW XBOX 360 CHANGED GAMING

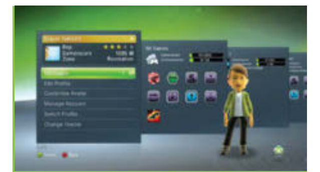
The innovations the console introduced and popularised that remain vital today





HD GRAPHICS

THE XBOX 360 ushered in the era of HD gaming and helped pave the way for HDTVs. Suddenly we became obsessed with interlaced and progressive scan resolutions, and whether we could get the same imagine quality from an HDMI, VGA or Component cable.



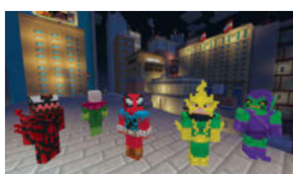
ACHIEVEMENTS

WHO WOULD have thought that getting that little popping unlock sound would become so addictive? Achievements as a concept had been around for years, but it took the Xbox 360 making them mandatory that turned them into a phenomenon.



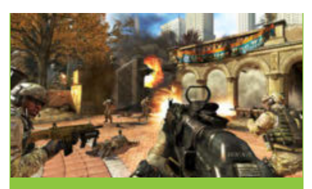
GAMERSCORE

AND WHAT would an Achievement be worth if it didn't contribute to a constantly accumulating score? Like adding an axel to a set of wheels, the Gamerscore gave the simple invention of Achievements some real motion. Suddenly we had something to chase.



DIGITAL DISTRIBUTION

THE XBOX 360 became the launch pad for us accepting downloadable games as a means of enjoyable Arcade titles. It set the seed that would become the modern appreciation for this release model and gave a new home to *Minecraft*.



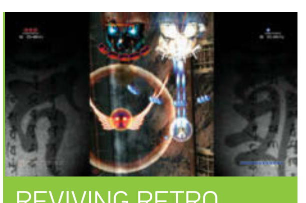
MATCHMAKING

TRUESKILL revolutionised the quality of our online gaming experience by calculating the likely outcome of games based on a very small set of data about your performance. Apparently it could work out in under 20 games what rank you should be.



KINECT

THE XBOX motion control system may have fallen on hard times and it may have been following in the footsteps of the EyeToy and Wii, but Kinect really made camera-based motion a concept people could get their head around in the living room. Plus, the tech is pretty incredible.



REVIVING RETRO GAMES

THE SUCCESS of *Geometry Wars* and *Hexic* saw the likes of *Tetris, Ikaruga, Sonic* and more make the leap to digital download where cheaper, smaller games could find a home again and retro classics could be reborn.



INDIE GAMES MARKET

AS AN extension of that thinking indies found a place on Xbox 360 too, but not just through the Arcade; through a dedicated Xbox Live Indie Games network where creators could self-publish experimental work. This is where the likes of *Mount Your Friends* and *The Impossible Game* found a home.



VOICE CHAT

LOST FOR a short while on Xbox One thanks to a reliance on Kinect, voice chat via Xbox Live was also widely embraced. Abuse about mothers aside, voice communication was vital for making Xbox 360 the home of multiplayer last generation and for advancing online play for consoles.



FRIEND LISTS

SUCH A simple element, but as we began to embrace social media, so being able to quickly see which of our friends were online and communicate with them became second nature and the 360 was ready to embrace that community too.



USER MADE GAMES

AS AN extension of the indie games program Microsoft also released XNA, a free development program for making your own games and then publishing them on Xbox 360 and PC. It was basic stuff, but as an introduction to coding it offered amazing opportunities to students and hobbyists.



CONTROLLER

LAST, BUT not least, we have the Xbox 360 gamepad, which we still hold to be the best designed controller in the history of gaming. Sure the D-Pad was complete rubbish, but the weight, feel, triggers and configuration of the whole thing were spot on.

have followed. Certainly there are PC gaming companies like Valve that really understand the transition from packaged goods and solitary play to virtual goods and online multiplayer, but the console business was pretty rigid in their posture – most of the players in the business had only recently moved from cartridges to disc media, they were incredibly dependent on retail as their only channel and multiplayer in many categories was an after thought because of the limitations of split-screen. Live was by no means a slam-dunk – *a lot* of perseverance was required to get support from the industry and to convince them of the value of a single identity and friends list, unlockable game trials, a unified leaderboard, achievements, required updates to prevent cheating and downloadable content. Today, it's hard to imagine gaming without these features, but a decade ago, these were very difficult discussions – especially as the new kids on the block.

Beyond Live, remember that *Halo* was slammed at E3 2000 – people didn't think it was fun and thought it would never work on a console. We got hammered for not having a modem and committing to broadband and insisting on the importance of voice. Generally speaking, the industry didn't have faith in mass storage, downloadable content or digital distribution. Concepts like trial versions of titles and non-retail titles like Xbox Arcade were met with resistance. Unified Gamertags and Friends, Achievements and user-generated content seemed like outrageous asks of publishers and developers. A decade later, FPS is probably the biggest category in console gaming, everyone has broadband, almost every title has downloadable content, all game platforms have achievements, leaderboards and friendslists and the massively successful *Minecraft* is about user-generated content at its core. Had we not persevered through the difficult discussions, many of these aspects of gaming would likely have played out much more slowly, and Xbox would not have become the brand that it grew into.

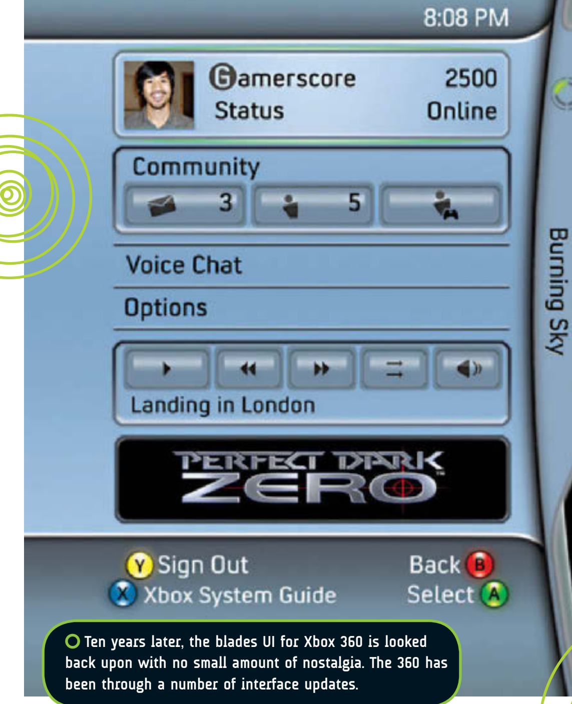
What was it like watching Achievements become a massive movement in gaming?

Its success is no surprise. Achievements was the textbook tough sell, even internally in a lot of cases. This was one of a small number of things that I personally fought very hard for knowing that it was going to be a terrific boost for the gaming experience – some on the team would say that I jammed it through. I felt that it was a new level for creators to guide a gamer through their experience, a new way for gamers to challenge each other competitively and a different way to keep score that could persist across games. Who hasn't tried to eat all 16 ghosts on the first level of *Pac-Man*? I just thought of Achievements as a formalisation of what core gamers have always done and a universal scoring system that could let you show off how much game you have. The people that fought it, or didn't get it were generally people that didn't bleed games. True gamers got it right away and it's been terrific to see the concept get adopted by virtually all gaming platforms out there and even extend into non-gaming under the guise of gamification. Sure, it's been done poorly, or overplayed by some, but I think gamers still get giddy when that Achievement notification pops up on the screen after doing something heroic and you earn another 25 Gamerscore. I do.

How much were you watching the competition and reacting to what they were doing?

I'd say a modest amount. We kept a keen eye on Sony's hardware performance and watching both companies' early attempts at online, but that was about it. There was enough history with both console companies that their next moves were fairly predictable. Nintendo leads each generation with content and adapts the controller uniquely to suit early titles with new mechanics. Because they focus on younger gamers, cost of the console is very important so their hardware is generally underpowered relative to the market. We correctly anticipated that online, again because of their young audience, would be a low priority for them. We believed Sony would push their media format (Blu-ray) heavily, push the hardware to the limit and be difficult to program like all previous generations. We incorrectly guessed that they would buy up a bunch of online companies because of the critical shift from traditional media to digital distribution given that it was the next obvious format and so much of their overall business has been dependent on the shift to next generation media formats.

Obviously, online is the ultimate and final format and it would have been very wise for them to make a major play there, but clearly they struggled with killing the sacred cow of physical media that had served them so well for a half-century.

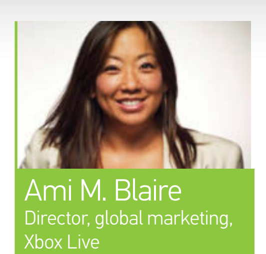


Ten years later, the blades UI for Xbox 360 is looked back upon with no small amount of nostalgia. The 360 has been through a number of interface updates.



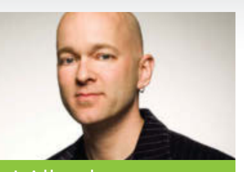
Where are they now?

The Xbox 360 launch team and what they've done since



Ami M. Blaire
Director, global marketing, Xbox Live

Blaire worked with Sony and Sega before taking up her role with Microsoft and went on to work as a vice president of global integrated marketing for Vivendi Games, and VP of the digital entertainment group at Square Enix. She is now managing partner, brand marketing and digital entertainment consultant for Lvl Up Marketing.



J Allard
Corporate vice president and chief XNA Architect

After his success as part of the Xbox design group, Allard was tasked with developing the Zune, Microsoft's rival to the iPod in 2007. Later he would lead Microsoft's exploration of mobile tech and a tablet prototype called Courier. In 2010 he retired from Microsoft and is now CEO of 529 Garage, a bicycle software startup in Portland, OR.



There were definitely factions within the team that did worry more about the competition and we spent a stupid amount of time on stuff like HD-DVD in response to the competition that just distracted us from our core beliefs. A new format for high-resolution movies was not important to us. Leading the charge in online gaming was – and the HD-DVD effort was a good example of how worrying about the competition can take you off your game.

Was there ever a big turning point or eureka moment for what the console would become?

Not really. When we approved the Xbox program in 1999, we had a very good sense for what we thought the first three generations would look like. The original Xbox was out of cycle relative to the competition and we knew that the second generation would need to follow quickly. In most ways, Xbox 360 was simply satisfying the vision that we had for a new game console that could disrupt the marketplace with something new for gamers and creators and hopefully usher in more participants in the category. The original two-page memo written to Bill [Gates] and Steve [Ballmer] even had several concepts that became part of Xbox One spelled out. I know it lessens the romance of the story, but when billions are at risk and you're designing ten-year platforms, there aren't a lot of eureka moments or wild flashes of genius – you need to be mindful, planful and hold steady on the rudder.

Did attitudes towards the Xbox brand and division change within Microsoft?

Xbox was always an interesting beast within Microsoft's culture from the get-go. Microsoft had a very rich history and success with productivity, developers and enterprise, but very little depth with consumers, hardware, retail or games. The part of Xbox that was very Microsoft was the platform element – the idea that Microsoft would do the heavy lifting to build a terrific foundation for developers to build on top of, but a lot of the program was very different than Microsoft's culture. In many ways, I thought about Xbox as the starting point for a second Microsoft – a company totally focused on consumers, entertainment and artists. There was certainly a lot of pioneering, or cowboy culture, ingrained in Xbox, but its soul was very Microsoft in terms of building an awesome platform for creators to do amazing work. I'm disappointed that it didn't become more for Microsoft than it did. Yes, it was a success in the gaming category, but I had always hoped it could be a launchpad for a consumer-minded platform, brand and set of products and services that complemented the productivity and Windows side of the business. Apple has done tremendously well with its focus on consumers, media, consumption and non-PC form factors. There was always the tension and appetite internally to try and twist Xbox into something that could help Windows be more successful. I always believed that being a smash hit for the company and building new muscles around consumer, entertainment, media and artistry was the best way to help Windows. It always felt like asking Windows to serve Xbox and Xbox to adopt Windows was a recipe to slow two great teams down and complicate two otherwise really clear businesses with different objectives.

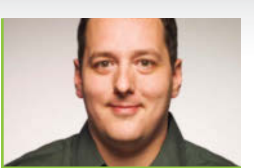
> "We got hammered for not having a modem and committing to broadband"

Were there any features or ideas that you were unable to implement that you would have liked to have achieved?

After we wrapped up 360, about a month before launch, one of the founders of 360 that had left the company came in for a full »



Microsoft really tried to develop a console that felt like a premium product with its chrome features and heavyweight accessories.



Jeff Henshaw
Executive producer, Xbox digital entertainment

Unlike many others, Henshaw remains at Microsoft and since 2011 has been operating as the group program manager for Xbox incubation, a team that explores entertainment concepts and drives business and technological advancements. It's the home of many innovative new ideas for the Xbox platform.



Jonathan Hayes
Design director, Xbox platform experience

Having left Microsoft after the launch of the Xbox 360, Hayes went independent and assisted with the original guitar and drum designs for *Rock Band*. This would spin out into a role as vice president of design for inMusic, working with music brands such as Numark & Denon DJ, Akai Pro and M-Audio. He is again working independently.



Peter Moore
Corporate VP, worldwide marketing and publishing

Perhaps having run out of room for more game announcements tattoos on his arms, Peter Moore left Microsoft for EA back in 2007 where he headed up the sports division. In 2011 he was promoted from EA Sports president to COO where he remains head of the division and has overseen a great deal of advancement in its brands.



Robbie Bach
Chief Xbox officer and senior vice president

Bach's career at Microsoft lasted for 22 years seeing him rise through the ranks from product manager on Microsoft Works to president of the Entertainment and Devices Division. He had a hand in all of the entertainment division's movements at Microsoft. Since retirement he has become a speaker, author and civic engineer.



Shane Kim
General manager, Microsoft Game Studios

Kim was actually corporate VP of the Interactive Entertainment Business division of Microsoft by the time the Xbox 360 was launched in 2005 and would hold that role until 2010. Since then Kim became a director of the Positive Coaching Alliance, a director at the Standford Alumni Association and a director of GameStop.





As the console price point gradually reduced so the machine began to appeal to younger and broader demographics.

"There was certainly a lot of pioneering, or cowboy culture, ingrained in Xbox"

day visit and to see what the team had done in the year since he left. His comment was "I've never seen a product meet 95% of the original spec, you guys nailed it." I asked him what 5% was missing and he said, "I don't know, but I couldn't give you guys a perfect grade!" The team really did what we set out to do in terms of the core functionality for gamers and creators. Following the launch and into Xbox One, I think the excitement around and incredible sales of Kinect became a huge focus for the team and the advancement of much of the rest of the platform slowed. There's still a lot more that could be done with the achievements infrastructure, for example, and we had designed most of it but it remains unfinished. I think that user-generated content is still a very second-class citizen in most game experiences.

The idea of persistent worlds is really the realm mostly of MMORPGs still and not a universal concept in most games. The new shiny object is clearly the VR/AR space, which I think is at least a decade away from approaching mainstream and being able to deliver a flawless, affordable experience with intuitive UX mechanics. I hope the team still has the passion and focus on evolving Live into its full potential because I see a lot of remaining runway there and awesome stuff that can be done for gamers.

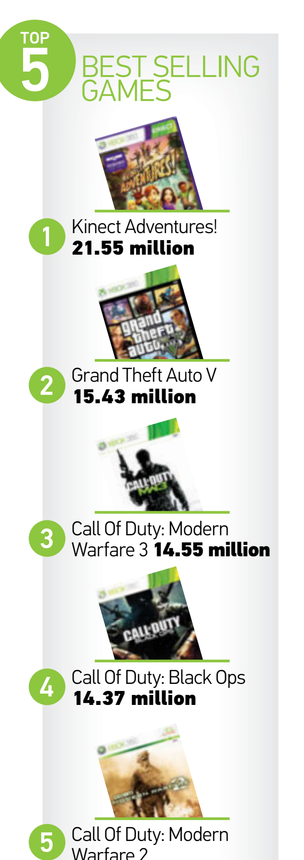
Looking back, do you consider that period to be especially fulfilling creatively?

I think most people think creativity is running around with a new crazy idea everyday and having breakthrough eureka moments. On something like the Xbox 360 project, I think sweating the details and solving hard problems demands incredible creativity, but not the type that the media likes to romanticise. The Xbox 360 project was really simple. It wasn't easy, but relative to the army working on it, the goals and specs were very clearly defined. The creativity was in working through the hard problems that came up to meet those goals to get it done on time, on budget and with the features we promised. We sweated a lot of details to make sure that gamers wouldn't be disappointed and that developers could realise their creative vision. Looking back and seeing the many positive things it's contributed to gaming and how it's inspired other companies and teams to deliver better experiences is very satisfying… Building a delightful product isn't a lot of sexy, fun creative work. It's a lot of hard, demanding and exacting work.

What you've been doing since leaving Microsoft?

I still play a lot of games, although I'm embarrassed to still be shy of 50,000 Gamerscore on Xbox. I moved to Portland a couple years back and I've been helping out a couple of companies that I really believe in by sharing the experience and lessons I picked up at Microsoft. I'm also spending a lot of time riding and racing bikes. After having my bike stolen a few years back, I dove deep into researching the problem of bike theft, which was very eye opening. It's an insidious epidemic and the bad guys are both using technology more effectively and are better organised than the good guys. Realising that no one has done much to address the problem, myself and a few friends started a company and built a service and tools to attack this problem.

It's called the 529 Garage and it's fun to be working on such a massive, multi-billion dollar problem with no budget, a tiny team, a completely new industry and a brand no one has heard of. It's definitely a big departure from Xbox 360, but I'm lucky enough to have those experiences and lessons to apply to this new challenge and have been learning a ton and having a blast.



TOP 5 BEST SELLING GAMES

1. Kinect Adventures! **21.55 million**
2. Grand Theft Auto V **15.43 million**
3. Call Of Duty: Modern Warfare 3 **14.55 million**
4. Call Of Duty: Black Ops **14.37 million**
5. Call Of Duty: Modern Warfare 2 **13.42 million**

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Reviews



66

ASSASSIN'S CREED: SYNDICATE

Has Ubisoft put the ghosts of Unity to rest with its Victorian escapade through London?



THE AVERAGE

Three of the numbers in a ten-point scale are of greater importance than the others: five, seven, and of course, ten. Some publications would fool you into believing that a 7/10 game is average, but that just doesn't make sense to us. **games™** reviews videogames on their entertainment value, and so any title that simply performs to an adequate standard will receive a 5/10. Simple. The elusive ten is reserved for games of incredible, irrefutable quality, but please be aware that a score of ten in no way professes to mean perfection. Perfection is an unattainable goal, and on a ten-point scale nothing should be unattainable. Again, simple. Our reviews are not a checklist of technical features with points knocked off for flaws, neither are they a PR-pressured fluff-fest – we'd never let that happen, and besides you'd smell it a mile off. And finally, the reviews you find within these pages are most certainly not statements of fact, they are the opinions of schooled, knowledgeable videogame journalists, designed to enlighten, inform, and engage. The gospel according to **games™**.

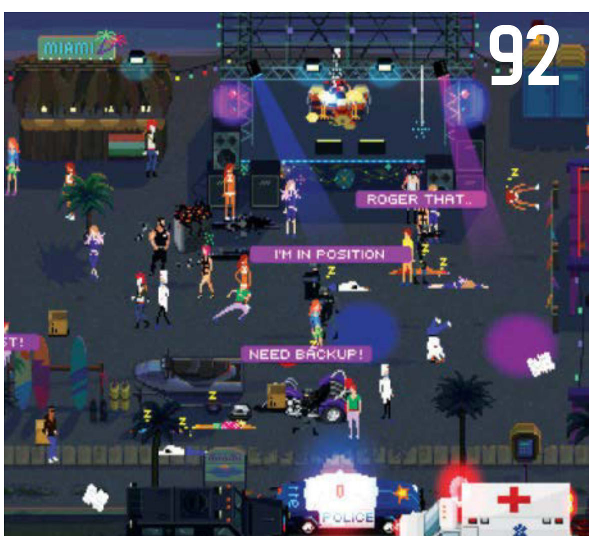












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"ASSASSIN'S CREED HAS ALWAYS PRIDED ITSELF ON BEING CONVOLUTED, BUT THE PLOT OF SYNDICATE IS AN EXERCISE IN TACTFUL STREAMLINING"

YO YOHALEM

The real star of *Assassin's Creed: Syndicate* is arguably its pithy, well-formed script. The game's lead writer Jeffrey Yohalem began working with Ubisoft in Montreal straight out of university, and is credited on *Far Cry 3* (for which he was BAFTA nominated), *Child of Light*, *Assassin's Creed II* and *Rainbow Six Vegas 2* among others. His biggest success to date came in 2010 when he was awarded with a Writer's Guild of America award for penning *Assassin's Creed: Brotherhood*. Up next is rumoured to be a sequel to *Child Of Light*, but his next project probably depends on how *Syndicate* performs. Even if it flops, Ubisoft would be unwise to let him work on anything that isn't *Assassin's Creed*. The man knows what he's doing.





APOLOGY ACCEPTED

Assassin's Creed: Syndicate

FORMAT: PS4
OTHER FORMATS: PC, Xbox One
ORIGIN: Canada
PUBLISHER: Ubisoft
DEVELOPER: Ubisoft Quebec
PRICE: £54.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

Even if it weren't set in London during the Industrial Revolution (and even if Charles Dickens didn't appear as a pivotal character) *Assassin's Creed: Syndicate* would still have the demeanour of Oliver Twist politely asking for more workhouse slop. Cap in hand, Ubisoft wants to cordially remind fans of the high qualitative peaks that this franchise is capable of reaching, and would love it if we could all just forgot about last year's asinine little boo-boo. Looking for a spot of entertainment, guv'nor? Look no further…

For all its faults, *Syndicate* is a thoroughly respectable return to form. The fluidity and slickness that was comprehensively lacking from *Unity* has returned in full force here, and the outright removal of anything co-op or multiplayer related has given Ubisoft a renewed sense of focus. *Assassin's Creed* has always prided itself on being needlessly convoluted, but the plot of *Syndicate* is an exercise in simple, tactful streamlining. Rebecca Crane, Shaun Hastings and the series' tedious near-future shenanigans are barely included at all, making way for an impossibly simple good-vs-evil narrative. Slimeball mobster Crawford Starrick is (without question) the most cartoonish antagonist ever to feature in one of these games, but he's nothing if not memorable, and a fine engine for driving players through the low-speed grind of liberating the seven featured boroughs of London. Starrick talks about himself in the third person, docks the wages of his child workers when they fall ill and employs minions who dress head-to-toe in black leather with red Templar armbands: subtle it is not. But as an alternative to endless clandestine meetings between networks of bearded nobodies, it's a pretty potent tonic.

Returning for a moment to the idea of *Assassin's Creed: Syndicate* as an apology for *Unity*, it's interesting to note that the most resourceful and compelling characters in *Syndicate* are all women. In what appears to be atonement for the fracas that surrounded the lack of female characters in *Unity*, lead writer Jeffrey Yohalem has chosen to focus on a set of personalities who do not fit into the classic *AC* mould. Villain Lucy Thorne is unpredictable and truly formidable. London's fearsome community of child thieves is micro-managed by a pig-tailed infant genius named Clara. And of the two central heroes – the brother and sister team of Evie and Jacob Frye – it's Evie's thoughtful and cunning nature, as opposed to her brother's more traditional brand of brute machismo, that moves the story along.

But while Evie and Jacob could not be any more different on the page, during play the siblings are basically identical. It is fleetingly suggested that Evie is more stealth-oriented and Jacob more astute in combat, but the characters' skill trees are indistinguishable. You're encouraged to switch between the pair regularly to keep their skillsets on an even keel, but when the story dictates that the duo disagree and periodically go off on their own, this simply results in two missions that need to be played by one character apiece. Choosing sides is never really an option and the narrative militantly toes a straight line. If you go in expecting the kind of ingenious crosscutting between characters that was offered by the biggest action sequences in *GTA V*, you're going to be deeply disappointed.

One area in which *Syndicate* shines brightest is in its invigorating new methods of traversal. Using a grappling hook to scale tall buildings at speed (and using the same tool to craft impromptu zip-lines all over the city) is not exactly a new sensation, but it makes challenging on-foot pursuits a great

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

GO HOME: Need some funds? Unfortunately you still have to return all the way back to your hideout in order to retrieve them. Talk about outdated and archaic design.

Left: Two of *Unity*'s most galling gameplay omissions – the ability to throw bodies and the ability to whistle to draw attention to yourself – thankfully make a return in *Syndicate*. Hardcore fans are sure to be more than pleased.

Above: *Syndicate*'s London is comprised of seven boroughs: Southwark, Westminster, The Strand, Whitechapel, City of London, The Thames and Lambeth.

BETTER THAN
ASSASSIN'S CREED: UNITY

WORSE THAN
ASSASSIN'S CREED: BLACK FLAG

Left: In addition to the amplified stealth, there are also far more barnstorming action sequences in *Syndicate* than there were in *Unity*, with many of most memorable ones involving trains. There's little time to get bored here.

deal more satisfying, bringing player improvisation back to the fore. A word of warning though: if you've recently tackled Rocksteady's *Arkham Knight*, check your surroundings before leaping heroically from a lofty vantage point into the streets below. The capes available here are purely cosmetic.

Some of the best and most integral parts of the campaign involve steam trains. In addition to being your mobile base of operations, steam trains are the setting for the most exciting action setpieces in the campaign, and offer an enjoyable (though occasionally dangerous) option if you're looking to hitch a ride. Steamboats on the other hand cruise in and out of London via the Thames, and on the few occasions that you're asked to move from one side of the river to the other, the game makes the very most of it. Being asked to make your way across the Thames, *Frogger*-style, without getting wet, is a reminder that these games have always tried to make traversal as entertaining as physically possible. Unlike its predecessor, *Syndicate* has an engaging and playful sense of fun about it.

Conversely though, cutting across the London streets in a horse and cart makes for a far less bracing experience. Essentially (very) slow cars with an inexplicable sideways shunt procedure built in, they're only fun to pilot when you're transporting a kidnapped felon, and are constantly forced to use your vehicle as a battering ram at the same time as ensuring that it stays in one piece long enough for you to reach your destination. When their usage isn't mandatory, most players will opt for a trusty zip-line instead.

As with all pre-*Unity* entries, reaching the finale of *Syndicate* involves a pretty substantial amount of grinding, but liberating each new patch of the capital stays fresh thanks to some new systems and activities. The missions in which you rescue child workers from refineries and warehouses are quintessential *Assassin's Creed*, with each environment custom built for nimble stealth. Bounty Hunts are self explanatory, but almost never go according to plan: whether you're spotted with your prisoner before or after you bundle them into a getaway carriage, you're almost always forced to improvise your way out of trouble. To cap it all off, when you've liberated the final portion of a borough, a gang war is initiated, which is often little more than a massive street brawl between Starrick's Blighters and your upstart Rooks. If you've levelled up beyond your environment, these battles can reach a climax a tad too quickly, but the bombast and scale of them (as well as their resemblance to scenes from Martin Scorcese's *Gangs of New York*) always manages to elicit a thrill.

FAQs

Q. THERE'S REALLY NO MULTIPLAYER?

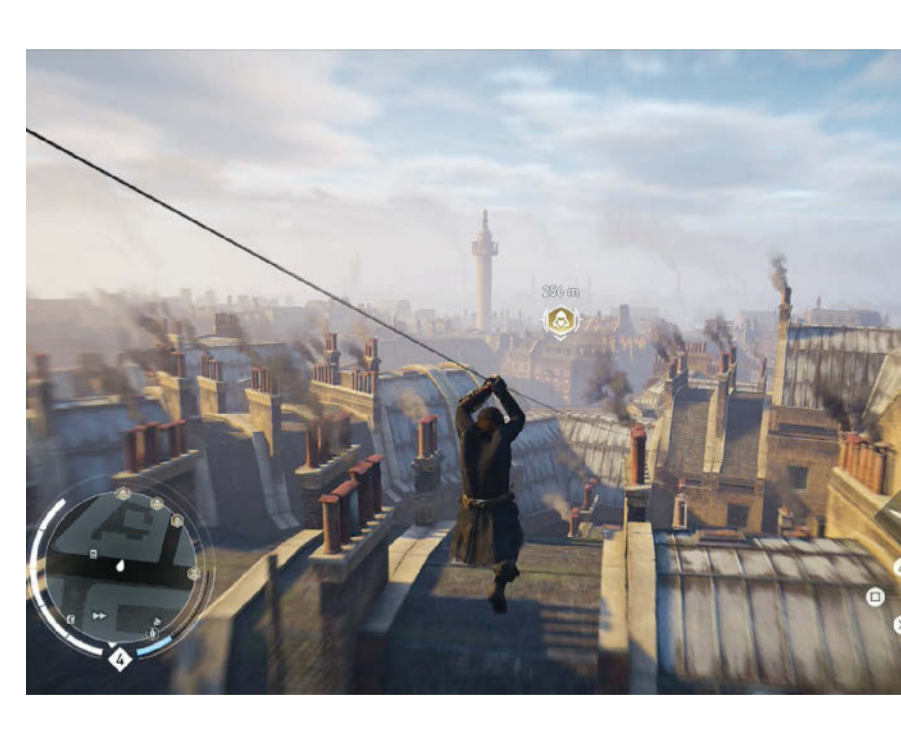
None at all. No multiplayer, no co-op and no Wolfpack missions. It's like 2007 all over again.

Q. IS THE COCKNEY INSUFFERABLE?

No, actually. There is the odd cliché and the odd hammy performance, but it's all surprisingly restrained.

Q. SAME TEAM AS UNITY?

No. *Syndicate* was made by Ubisoft Quebec, who worked on the Wii U port of *Black Flag* and *Assassin's Creed: Rogue*.

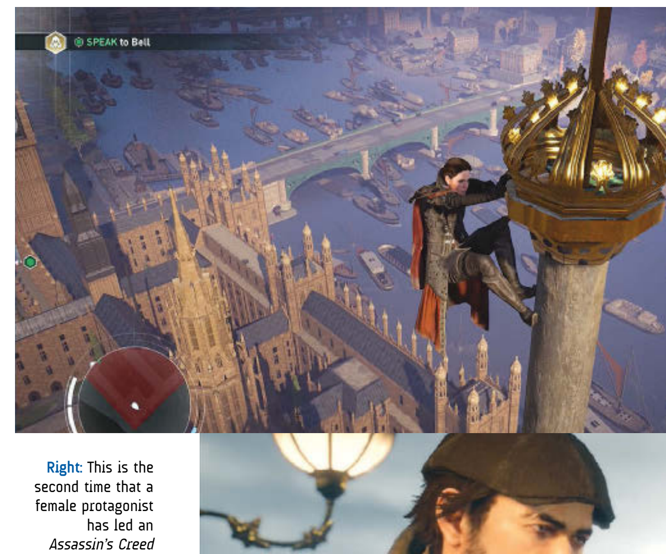


Right: The grapple gun doesn't double up as a weapon, so anyone looking to mimic *Mortal Kombat*'s Scorpion will have to keep on dreaming.

Unity's drab effigy of Paris – which was populated almost exclusively by pedestrians yelling drearily into the void – has been effortlessly surpassed by a London that really does feel alive. On foggy mornings you'll spot miserable commuters skulking to work over the Thames and street sweepers busily making the area around Nelson's Column look presentable. In the back streets behind pubs, clumsy fights break out among drunks in the afternoon, as evasive gangs of adolescent pickpockets drift in and out of view. In short, while *Unity*'s Paris felt like little more than an empty projection, *Syndicate*'s London feels akin to a real place. There's even a dynamic weather system and a day/night cycle, two variables that have traditionally only ever been mission-specific.

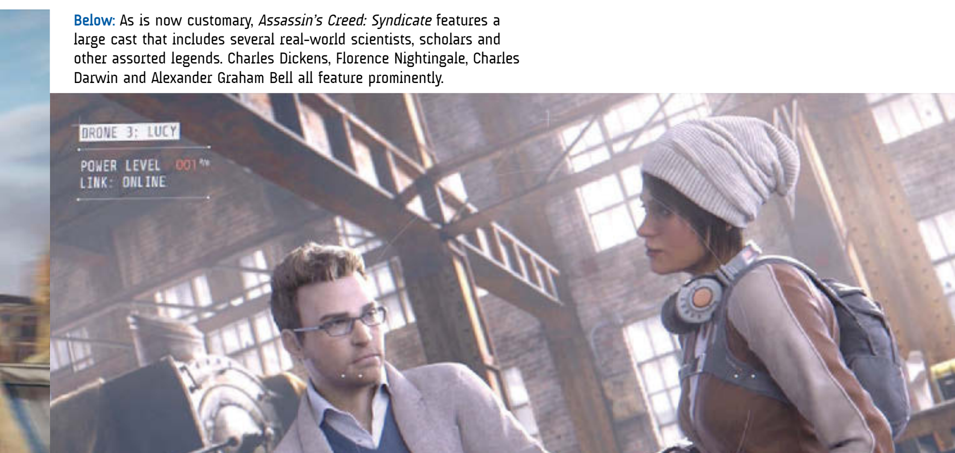
More important though is the fact that you never feel intimidated by the world or what's in it, despite London being more than three times the size of Paris. *Unity*'s map was so comically over-stuffed with icons that it was almost impossible to accurately manoeuvre, and *Syndicate* greatly benefits from a bit of ruthless downsizing; not only do you never feel suffocated by incomplete fetch quests, you're now far more likely to happen upon a side-mission that's almost as enjoyable and well-crafted as the missions in the campaign.

Thankfully there's no irksome companion app this time around and even Ubisoft Club Rewards, a hellish-sounding system that allows you to buy genuinely desirable pieces of kit with old Uplay points, is well implemented and not intrusive in the slightest.



Right: This is the second time that a female protagonist has led an *Assassin's Creed* adventure, the first being 2012's *ACIII* spin-off *Liberation*.

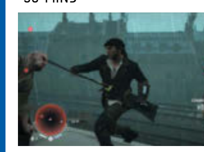
Below: As is now customary, *Assassin's Creed: Syndicate* features a large cast that includes several real-world scientists, scholars and other assorted legends. Charles Dickens, Florence Nightingale, Charles Darwin and Alexander Graham Bell all feature prominently.



TIMELINE HIGHLIGHTS

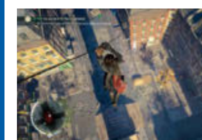
THE BEST BITS IN THE GAME AND WHEN YOU CAN EXPECT TO SEE THEM

30 MINS



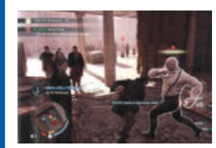
Kicking things off with a couple of big, loud and most importantly fun action sequences is a great way of letting fans know that the series is back on track.

5 HOURS



When you unlock the grappling hook, *Syndicate* turns into a different game altogether. It's not exactly naval combat, but it does add a priceless sense of fun.

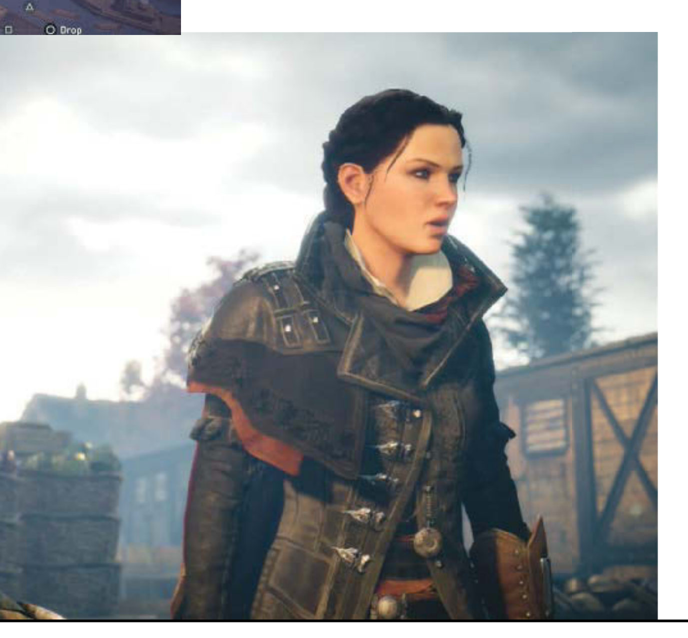
15 HOURS



Once you've unlocked most of *Syndicate*'s sprawling London and most of what's on offer in both of your skill trees, the action never lets up. And it isn't easy.

GANG UPGRADES

Once you've begun accumulating turf and have started to nurture a bit of a local following, you can use your cash to upgrade your ragtag army of Rooks. You can start by giving them combat training or purchasing carriages for them to ride around in, but before long you're able to boost their firepower, nerf the influence of the Templars that they face off against or educate them in the joys of money laundering (for your benefit, of course). If you're lagging behind on the levelling front and can't be bothered to grind, upgrading the Rooks is absolutely imperative. Just remember to nip back to the hideout in order to retrieve your funds first. Old school.



Microtransactions are still sadly present and correct, but they're buried deep enough to be forgotten and if you're patient you'll never feel compelled to invest in them anyway.

As usual though, this is a game hamstrung by its own punishing development cycle. In the wake of long-form opuses like *The Witcher III* and *Metal Gear Solid V*, *Syndicate* feels hurried and slapdash, and packed with engine quirks that are likely to do solid business on YouTube. At any point during the campaign, you can encounter waves of enemies that refuse to attack you, children who flee from danger by tap-dancing up bannisters and vital fast-travel options that become impossible to select for absolutely no reason. You're still beamed into the tail-end of missions so that you can walk forward a few paces to trigger the next one, loading screens are still way more prevalent than they should be and you're never allowed to access your inventory or craft something unless you're standing on solid ground. If you're perched on a knee-high wall or stuck on a rooftop in dire need of a pistol upgrade, you are bang out of luck.

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

NO LOYALTY: For some reason there's a loyalty system that shifts when you perform side missions. A couple of gift weapons aside, it has no bearing on anything.

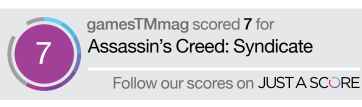
Ubisoft's utterly trivial dynamic crowd events continue to appear, and in a game that does a decent job of dispensing with filler, they stick out like hundreds of sore thumbs. In addition to randomly being asked to pursue a thief here or kill some aggressors there, your repertoire now stretches to intimidation mini-games, which consist of standing in front of an NPC until they panic and run away. These bits of business are every bit as exhilarating as they sound, but like the other crowd events, they can be easily ignored. Thank goodness.

Long-term fans may also be mildly alarmed by what appear to be re-used assets. Stretches of the sewer system and some of the larger (accessible) mansions bear an uncanny resemblance to those seen in *Unity*; another dispiriting but inevitable trait of a project that arguably should have taken twice as long to create. Even if they are similarities rather than outright lifts, it's always disappointing when passive design makes you feel as if you're sleepily retreading old ground.

But overall, *Assassin's Creed: Syndicate* is a very difficult game to dislike. It was never intended to break the mould, it's no kind of reinvention and it probably won't win the series many new fans. It is resolutely more of the same, but robust and varied with it. A formulaic and tentative crowd pleaser, but a crowd pleaser nonetheless.

VERDICT

CONVENTIONAL BUT OFTEN BRILLIANT



TURN IT UP TO A SEVEN

Rock Band 4

Rock Band 4 isn't a reboot, or a restart, or even a direct sequel. Rather, it's a relocation – a migration of the brand across generations. We want to start by saying this: our review is of what comes on the disc. *Rock Band 4* intends to be a platform, an iteration, a game kept alive by the DLC and services it will put out at, apparently, regular intervals. Right now, that's a relief.

Because what comes on the disc is a step back from *Rock Band 3*. We'll take the defences Harmonix has put out when it comes to stripping away Pro-mode – this is meant to be a party game, a *fun* game, a simple game. Pro mode wasn't any of that, fair enough – we can deal with the loss. But there are some other missing elements that feel odd… we went back to *Rock Band 3* as we were reviewing *4* to compare and contrast, and *3* just felt fuller.

For a game that wants you to live out the fantasy of being a rock god, we were actually disappointed by the lack of customisation options when held against previous games. Small details (gloves, shoes, tattoos etc) are missing – gone entirely – and that made us ponder. It's superficial, sure, but all part of the experience. This sort of feeds into the lack of online play – we're *certain* that'll come in down the line, but not being able to make a *true* version of yourself and play with *true* versions of friends… on the PS4/Xbox One, you'd have almost thought that was a given.

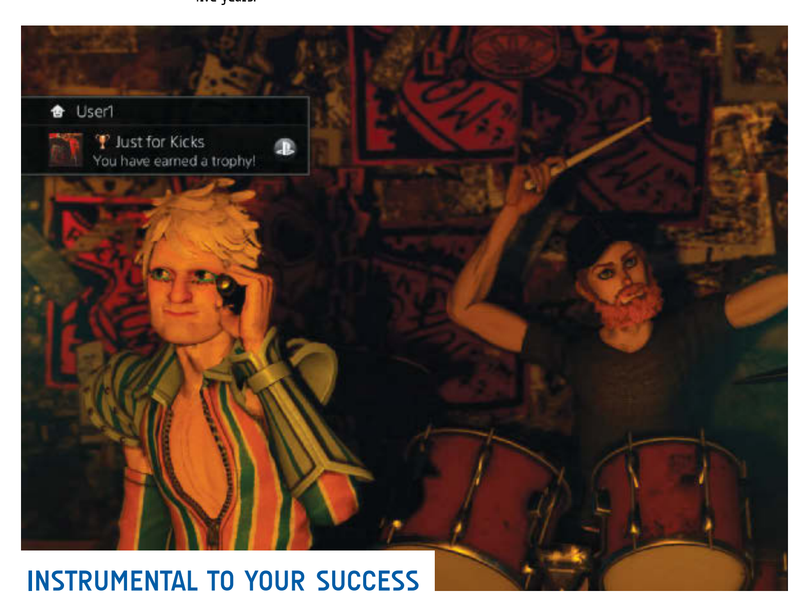
At least, then, the core mechanics are in place. The main gameplay of this series hasn't changed at all from what you'll drunkenly remember playing with your friends some five years ago. If anything, it's better, actually – we prefer the instruments, the vocal detection is *vastly* improved over *Rock Band 3*, and even the note lanes and gem effects themselves come across much nicer. Graphically, the cartoon style still disappoints compared to console competition, but the art direction works really well (and who's looking at the graphics when they play *Rock Band*, anyway?)

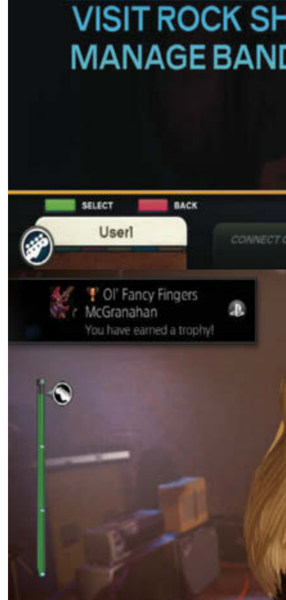
The big new changes to the game come in the form of 'solo' sections on guitar, and custom fills on drums, as well as the ability to 'improvise' lyrics as long as you're in the same key/range as the original. These parts deviate from how *Rock Band* typically scores you, meaning you can just have fun with those sections and really *go* for it… in theory. Think about the score-chasers, though, the players

FORMAT: PS4
OTHER FORMATS: Xbox One
ORIGIN: USA
PUBLISHER: Mad Catz/Harmonix
DEVELOPER: Harmonix
PRICE: £69.85
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-4
ONLINE REVIEWED: No



Above: Gunning for that five-star streak as a band remains as tense as ever… but God help you if *you're* the one to mess it up… **Right:** Getting a good team together and hitting the road is one of the most satisfying things about *Rock Band* – and that thrill hasn't gone away over the last five years.





INSTRUMENTAL TO YOUR SUCCESS

With a new game comes new peripherals, and thanks to Mad Catz production and distribution, *Rock Band 4* has some of the best kit we've seen yet. Whilst we still prefer the aural feedback of a *Guitar Hero* guitar, the fretboards on the newest pieces are fantastic – hammer-ons and pull-offs are easier than ever to perform thanks to those, and doodling in the solos feels really nice on the higher frets. The drums are *far* more solid thanks to the rubber rims and reinforced pads, but the bass pedal actually has more resistance than you'd think, which makes prolonged play a bit more tiring than perhaps you're used to.



AS GOOD AS
GUITAR HERO: WARRIORS OF ROCK



WORSE THAN
DJ HERO 2

that gun for the leaderboard peaks: these custom fills and solos score differently, and require a whole new meta to sufficiently 'beat'. It's messed leaderboards up for now, and whilst we're sure that'll get fixed, you can't deny a large part of the *Rock Band* audience was in it for that arcade score-chasing action. Still, these features are fun, and have been applied to some legacy content, too; playing Outfield's *Your Love* and figuring out how to make a solo to fit that Eighties pop-rock vibe was very satisfying… especially when our drummer came in with a fill that rounded it all off perfectly.

It's reassuring at least that the 'campaign' portion of the game – the world tour – remains so good. There's an incredibly basic choice system under-pinning the whole thing, and as long as you continue to play the setlists and shows the countries of the world want, you'll earn all the limited customisation items in no time. This RPG flavour helps you feel more in control of your band's fate, but the lack of in-depth customisation, once again, stings (making your own symbols or creating your own stand-ins would have been very welcome). The pre-made characters you can have as stand-ins when there aren't four players aren't bad… but they're not *yours*. It's one of those elements of depth that may not be adding anything to the core experience of playing tracks and rocking out with your friends, but it would have given *Rock Band 4* some richness. Some of the ownership of the rock fantasy is missing, but not entirely lost.

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

REALLY MAKE IT YOUR OWN: The customisation is such an important part of this kind of fantasy, and the fact you can't ever make your band *yours* seems like such a glaring omission.

Keeping the band together is easier than ever now, at least: between songs, you're given the option to vote for what comes next. This happens either in 'Party' play mode, or at certain points during career mode. While this can help in general progression-related things, it seems to have come at the expense of making your own custom setlists… something we can't defend. That was a staple part of *Rock Band 3*, and if you're playing through over 1,000 songs in your DLC bank, you don't want to be selecting 'Play a long Metal Song' and just *hoping* it turns out to be Iron Maiden, right?

Our gripes about the game's seemingly random cuts aside, we can't deny this is the best party game available on the new consoles. It's rhythm action done right, as it always has been, and despite some bizarre step-backs in terms of functionality, Harmonix and Mad Catz have done a phenomenal job in setting up the *Rock Band* platform for this generation. The instruments are better than ever, the responsiveness of the game is excellent, the range of content available and on the way is superb. What's on the disc leaves a little to be desired, but it's a solid platform from which something better can be built. We just hope - *really* hope – that Harmonix keeps iterating upon it.

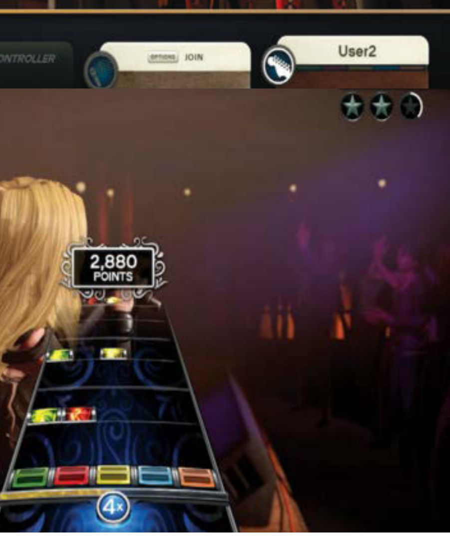
FAQs

Q. WHAT'S THE SETLIST LIKE?
There's a thin selection of 65 songs, and it focuses on modern releases and (bizarrely) has quite a lot of folk…

Q. WHAT'S TOUR MODE LIKE?
Actually really fun. Our band ended up basically getting 'Yoko'd' when a fashionista tagged along and we went for cool threads over better transport. Oops.

Q. HOW HARD IS EXPERT?
Don't worry – even if you cut your teeth (read: fingers) on Dragonforce back in the day, you'll still have plenty to learn here, too.

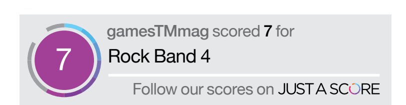




Above: The animations and stage presence your band has still isn't the most believable, but you can suspend your disbelief when you're mid-strum, looking out on your adoring audience.
Left: Something to be aware of: it's impossible to get all the trophies/achievements without owning three microphones and one of the new guitars… not ideal for legacy players.

VERDICT

DESPITE SOME FLAWS, IT'S STILL THE BEST PARTY GAME



THREE IS DEFINITELY THE MAGIC NUMBER

The Legend Of Zelda: Tri Force Heroes

Where's all the *Zelda* love gone? We've noticed a distinct lack of hype around this latest instalment and it's not entirely clear why. Perhaps it's because a multiplayer-focused game doesn't quite get the pulse racing for fans of a series that's consisted of predominantly solo affairs, or maybe it's just because all eyes are focused on next year's Wii U entry. Regardless, *Tri Force Heroes* is still an accomplished title, if not necessarily the one *Zelda* fans have been waiting for.

The game's plot is unlikely to be considered canon. Set in the idyllic and style-conscious region of Hytopia, the fashion-setting Princess Styla has been cursed by the evil witch of the nearby Drablands and forced to wear an ill-fitting black bodysuit. This fashion faux pas has plunged the kingdom into a deep depression so it's up to the player's unnamed hero to break the curse and give the princess her iconic sense of style back. A fairly shallow storyline, in more ways than one.

Tri Force Heroes plays similarly to the *Four Swords* games released on GameCube and GBA back in the day, with multiple Links teaming up and working together in each of the game's multi-stage levels. Where its predecessors featured four-player gameplay though, here the quartet is now a trio, which for the most part leads to more enjoyable and less overwhelming co-op experience. It's just as well, too: after all, it's clear that *Tri Force Heroes* is a game that wants to be played cooperatively rather than solo. The hub castle's co-op door is a large entrance proudly located front and centre in the hallway, while its single-player equivalent is a more modest affair sitting off to the side, leaving you in no doubt as to which is the preferred option.

Unsurprisingly then, playing alongside two other friends is an absolute treat, especially if they're in the same room as you. You can also play with friends or strangers online, but a lack of voice chat takes away from the experience, as half the fun is in discussing strategies and verbally assigning roles to each other. The sense of camaraderie is satisfying: your trio shares an energy bar and there are no rewards for killing more enemies than your teammates, so working together is your sole goal, and treachery isn't really on the cards unless you're into self-sabotage. Tapping the touch screen to make little cheering Link icons appear and galvanise your team is silly and pointless, but also endearing and impossible to resist.

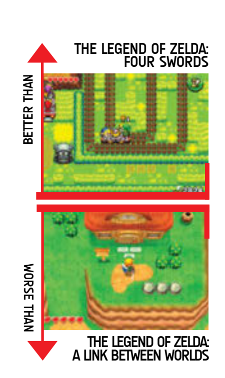
Playing solo, especially after playing with friends, can therefore feel like a slightly lonely experience for a while. It soon becomes clear however that *Tri Force Heroes'* single-player mode isn't worse, it's just different. Here you're accompanied by two doppels, which are Link dolls you can bring to life with the power of your mind. Essentially, this is a fancy way of saying you get to control all three Links, switching between them using the touchscreen in the style of vintage Blizzard game, *The Lost Vikings*. The result is a more slower-paced, methodical adventure than when you're playing in co-op and one that invokes different strategies, such as using the other Links as decoys when fighting bosses. What it loses in frantic "Oh God, argh, sorry" moments, it gains in opportunities to stop and calmly survey the situation.

DETAILS

~~FORMAT: 3DS~~
~~ORIGIN: Japan~~
~~PUBLISHER: Nintendo~~
~~DEVELOPER: In-house~~
~~PRICE: £34.99~~
~~RELEASE: Out now~~
~~PLAYERS: 1 or 3 (1 or 3 online)~~
~~ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes~~

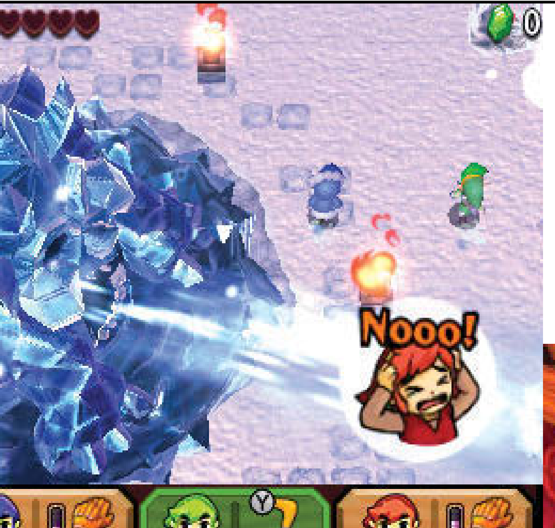


Right: During co-op play there are eight different emoticons on the touch screen, which you can tap whenever you like to tell your partners how you're feeling. It's useful when you're playing online with no voice chat.



Each of the game's themed worlds re-introduces a number of classic *Zelda* items, as well as a number of new ones. The Water Rod makes a large climbable column of water appear: useful for crossing over large gaps, but also for joining your partners on a higher ledge after you've already tossed them up there. The Fire Gloves, meanwhile, let you throw fireballs to melt the snow in wintry stages and clear paths for your teammates. Very few of these items appear in more than one world, thereby helping ensure each world has a different feel.

Also mixing things up is the game's costume mechanic, which lets you don



BALLS TO THAT

As well as the main game, *Tri Force Heroes* also includes a battle mode where one to three players can fight each other to the death. This mode's pretty throwaway and you'll only really play it to get the exclusive materials you'll need to unlock some outfits, but the one bright side is the hidden mini-game in the lobby while you wait to play. Charge into a wall with L or R and you'll make a purple ball fall from the sky. You can then play keepy-up with the ball using your sword, while a random classic *Zelda* theme plays in the background to help you time your swings properly. It's oddly addictive and rewards you with rupees depending on how well you do.





Left: Most puzzles and bosses are built around some variation of the co-op mechanic, but it may not take all three of you to perform the task at hand. Sometimes two Links can get the job done.

FAQs

Q. CAN I PLAY TWO-PLAYER?
Annoyingly, no. It's either one or three: you can't play with two humans and one doppel.

Q. CAN I WEAR A DRESS?
Indeed you can. There are outfits that let you dress up like Princess Zelda or a cheerleader.

Q. I WANT TO UNLOCK EVERYTHING.
Then you'll need to play co-op, as some outfits can only be unlocked with Friendly Tokens.

Left: Each outfit has a special ability. This one makes your spin attack more powerful, so is best worn in combat-heavy stages.

different outfits and gain new abilities. At first these are fairly straightforward – the Kokiri suit lets you fire three arrows at once if you pick up a bow – but over time new suits are added, some of which pay tribute not just to classic *Zelda* games, but other Nintendo properties too. The Tingle suit is better left unexplained, but other costumes include a Hammer Brother suit from the *Mario* games and a purple snow coat that looks suspiciously *Ice Climber*-esque.

Costumes are unlocked using a combination of rupees, special materials and Friendly Tokens, which you earn each time you play with a new partner. It's this unlocking process which forms much of the game's replay value, making players repeat stages to gather the required materials, some of which are exclusive to individual levels and even then only randomly awarded. Each level also has three different Challenge variants: these task you with completing them with unique rules (beating a time limit, playing in the dark, only using bombs and so on) and they offer you unique materials if you do.

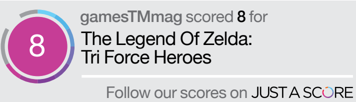
There's plenty of content to be found in *Tri Force Heroes*, with a healthy set of stages that – despite its clear multiplayer leanings – are still fun to play through on your own. It's blatantly never going to rival the *Ocarina*s or *Wind Waker*s of the world, but as a game for *Zelda* fans to get stuck into while they wait for the next main event, it's an excellent stop-gap.

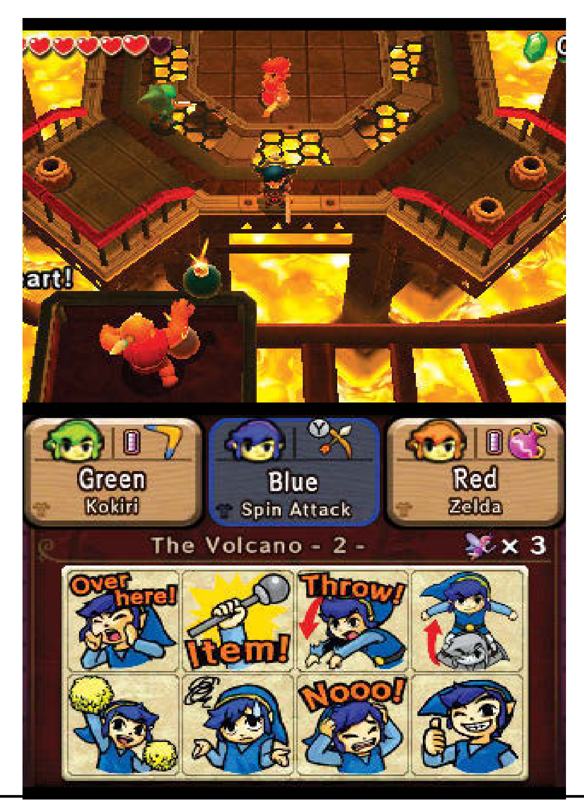


GRIEFER BANS: Since this is a co-op game and some people like to watch the world burn, you can add online troublemakers to a blacklist so you'll never encounter them again.

VERDICT

A CO-OP GEM THAT'S ALSO SURPRISINGLY FUN ALONE







Above: The Champions League license remains a strong trump card in the *PES* pack with all the trappings of the event recreated in fine detail.

FANTASY FOOTBALL

Pro Evolution Soccer 2016

Balance is everything in a football game. For *FIFA* in recent years the balance has been more or less right for a long time and it's felt as if the designers were simply moving some sliders around each year, tweaking the game before release. With *PES* it's felt more like entire chunks of game were being added and updated with each edition, making for a more satisfying journey over the last few years, even if it also meant that the game itself felt a little cobbled together. The balance ultimately was always off.

PES 2016 is easily the most refined and complete-feeling game this series has put out in years. It has the poise and grace of an elite athlete, with passing that's crisp, movement that's fluid, and a football experience that feels as full of possibilities and rooted in tactical play as the real thing. You can go into a match with a clear gameplan, key positions well suited to the task at hand and still end up with a 1-0 win thanks to a fluky deflection off the boot of an oncoming defender. The ball physics and range of movement make everything seem possible.

But it all feels grounded in tactics. The approach each team takes to the game feels like it has a real impact on how players behave off the ball. Counter-attack teams need you to move the ball quickly from back to front, otherwise they get bogged down. Possession teams need you to move the ball around for a while and to be patient, otherwise openings won't appear. Play to the strengths of your team (and sign players in Master League who match those approaches) and you reap massive rewards. It's like the chemistry system of *FIFA*'s Ultimate Team, only without the sense of forced rubber-banding. This has purpose and intent.

FORMAT: Xbox One
OTHER FORMATS: PS4, PS3, Xbox 360, PC
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Konami
DEVELOPER: PES Productions
PRICE: £39.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-8 (2-22 Online)
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

PES 2016 feels close to perfection in its on-pitch action. So close in fact that it's hard to think of much PES Productions could do with the fundamentals of the game that would really make it much better than this, barring a few elements. But in the running battle with EA Sports' flagship title, Konami has never gotten closer in the last decade. We just hope that with all the talk of moving away from triple-A development it can maintain the interest in this product that could keep it moving in the right direction.

Because as good as *PES 2016* is, this is still not the finished package. Many of the

FAQs

Q. IS PES BACK THEN?

Are we really still asking that question? Let's just say if you've been ignoring it, you should start paying attention.

Q. CAN I UPDATE TEAM INFO?

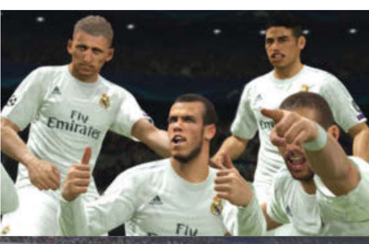
On PS4 and PS3 you can import images and there are already templates to update all the unlicensed teams. This isn't available on the Xbox versions.

Q. IS THE COMMENTARY ANY BETTER?

No.



Left: There are few things as satisfying as a perfectly timed sliding tackle in this game. Defending can be a source of overall frustration however, as player switching still leaves something to be desired.



Right: Outside of the elite players, player models remain uneven at best and downright frightening at worst.



Below: *PES*'s corner and free kick mechanics remain a challenge to master, but do require a steady hand and some skill to pull off.

old templates remain. The addition of image importing to allow team kit updates on PS3 and PS4 is a fantastic addition, already taken advantage of by canny designers. It's just a shame that the in-game customisation tools have been left untouched, seemingly using the same designs and templates we had in *Pro Evolution Soccer 6*.

While much of the animation is really quite brilliant, some of it is laughable. We'd encourage you to watch Gareth Bale run, for instance. It's one of the funniest things we've seen in a sports game recently that wasn't a glitch video. And the transitions as you select defenders remain an issue from last year. We still weren't picking up pretty obvious defensive players when trying to stop a breakaway, and our gamepad was thrown around the room on several occasions in fits of frustration unseen for many years. *PES 2016* can be so truly brilliant at times that when it does fall apart it feels beyond belief in its stupidity.

We also feel we ought to mention some bizarre stutters we experienced during games played on Xbox One. It was almost like we were experiencing lag, except we were playing against the AI in single-player. It happened every few games and didn't seem to occur on PS4. We hope that this will be a simple enough bug to update soon, although Konami's slow response to squad updates doesn't bode well for future support of the title. The game has essentially launched with 2014/15 squads, which only accentuates the issue of licensing for those who care about such details in their football games.

What it comes down to in the end – if you've decided you need to choose between the two premier football games on the market – is range and diversity versus focused excellence. *FIFA* has the package, the modes, the huge rosters and the longevity that will keep you occupied for months. *PES 2016* gives you the instant action, improved and interesting modes throughout (Master League is really excellent this year) and a great interpretation of the sport. What it lacks is some very small elements of polish and perhaps the depth of experience that would make it a game to last more than the next 12 months.

So we're left with the one simple question we ask each year; *FIFA* or *PES*? Ultimately, the good and bad of *FIFA* seem to meet each other, pressing us in the middle and resulting in a constant and not entirely displeasing hum. There's good and there's bad in masses on both sides and you can get a little lost in the noise of it all, but ultimately there's so much of everything it's difficult to argue with the value of it all. You get a lot for your money.

Pro Evo's great moments are frequent and launch you into the stratosphere, but they shoot up out of the dirt of mediocrity. Every now and again you come crashing back down to the ground and remember that this is a game still built on age-old templates and outdated ideas. *PES 2016* is inconsistently superb, but it can no longer be ignored. Football fans have a difficult choice to make this year. You can follow the money and glamour of *FIFA* or embrace the grassroots love of the game in *PES 2016*. Neither choice seems wrong to us, but neither is perfect yet either. What we do have finally though, after a decade or so of waiting, is a real contest.

ENHANCED

IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

WEATHER WATCHING: Dynamic and improved weather is a nice touch with shifts in conditions a possibility during a game. It's not overused, but it can see players slipping in the wet if they turn sharply.

IT'S ALL IN THE PRESENTATION

Last year's *PES* was solid, but lacking in the presentation department. This year, it feels more like a premium product, albeit with the occasional lapse. Commentary for instance is downright awful throughout. If we hear Jim Beglin complain again about no goals being scored after 20 in-game minutes we're likely to throttle someone. And while celebration controls are a nice touch, there's a lot of repetition. Menus feel tighter and faster though, which makes Master League and in-game tinkering easier to manage. The music is pretty decent too, which makes a change.

BETTER THAN

PES 2015

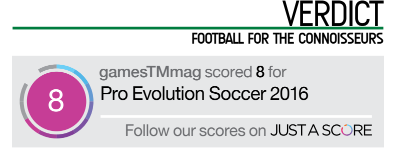


AS GOOD AS

FIFA 16

VERDICT

FOOTBALL FOR THE CONNOISSEURS



A CLASSIC LEGO ADVENTURE HOBBLED BY A PUNISHING PRICE POINT

LEGO Dimensions

With the toys-to-life genre becoming such a success for Activision and Disney, it was perhaps inevitable that Warner Bros would target it also. *LEGO Dimensions* is the end result and it's a game that delights as much as it infuriates. It's also the game which is most likely going to break the genre, as it's highly unlikely that all three brands are going to be able to compete in such a highly competitive space. Before we discuss *LEGO Dimensions*' greatest failing however, let's first look at everything the game does so very right.

Compared to the other toy-lines, *LEGO Dimensions*' greatest trump card is the *LEGO* itself. While the numerous expansion packs certainly aren't cheap, they work far better as toys than *Skylander* and *Disney Infinity* figures do. Pop Gandalf off his disc and he'll happily visit your daughter's *LEGO* friends house or drive that ice cream truck you've made. The same can be said for the many items and vehicles that are included in the different packs – all of which have three distinct forms. The LEGO creations are proper toys and the way they are used in the game constantly reminds you of that fact.

Another crucial difference that *LEGO Dimensions* has over its competitors is its actual portal. In addition to having to build it, the portal also changes in time as you collect parts of it during the game. It doesn't actually affect gameplay in any way, but it reminds you that you're always playing with something tangible. The base can hold up to seven characters at a time and is used to solve various puzzles in the game. An enemy might trap your character, forcing you to swap it from one part of the base to another, or you might need to move a character so you can unlock something onscreen. It's a neat touch, but it does begin to outstay its welcome as the 12-hour campaign reaches its conclusion, with the constant swapping of characters becoming quite annoying – particularly when using an already crowded portal. Still, it does allow you to fix one issue of previous games – you can remove the character completely when they inevitably become stuck in an onscreen object.

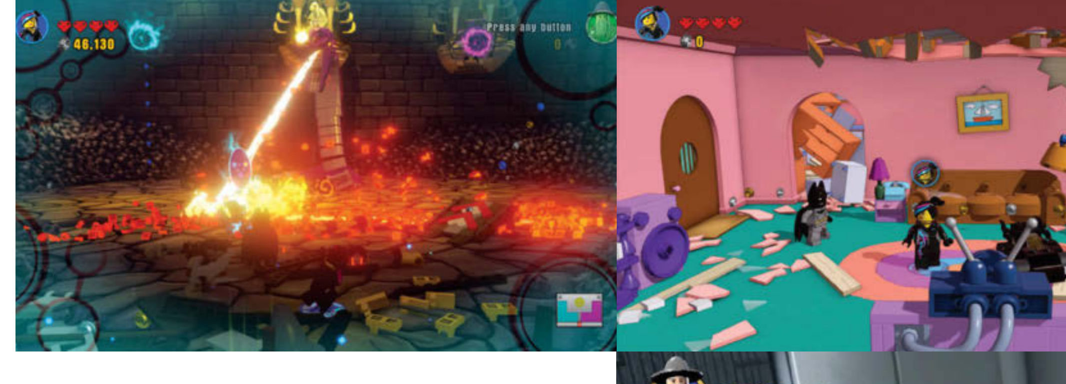
While the portal manipulation does get tiresome, Traveller's Tales must be commended for the clever ways it's used in-game. There are numerous keystones to collect and they all do different things. One creates different coloured warp portals, one turns your characters into walking paint boxes, meaning you must place them on different parts of the base to match the colours seen in-game, while yet another allows you to conduct different elements, which allow you to interact with opposing elements. The best keystone lets you shrink and enlarge characters, while the weakest simply requires you to walk around a large area until you find a portal rip so you can solve an onscreen problem. Despite the physical character swapping, they create some

FORMAT: PlayStation 4
OTHER FORMATS: PlayStation 3, Xbox 360, Xbox One, Wii U
ORIGIN: United Kingdom
PUBLISHER: Warner Bros Interactive Entertainment
DEVELOPER: Traveller's Tales
PRICE: £99.99 (£89.99 PS3, Xbox 360, Wii U)
RELEASE: Out Now
PLAYERS: 1-2
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

Right: This is easily the funniest *LEGO* game yet with plenty of pop culture references and some genuinely funny lines.



Above: Once upon a time you'd simply unlock all these characters with studs. Now you have to pay using cold hard cash. We can't stress how much this has affected our overall thoughts on the game.

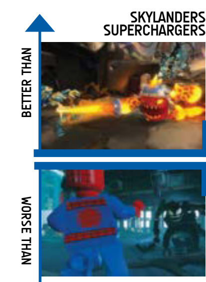


Right: The puzzles are decent, but really come into their own on the Portal level. You'll often have to use several keystones at once, meaning it might be an issue for younger gamers.



XTRA
PART





FAQs

Q. CAN YOU UPGRADE VEHICLES?
Yes, you can – it's done by collecting studs.

Q. WILL IT APPEAL TO YOUNGSTERS?
Yes, but it's worth noting that those under the age of ten might struggle with portal puzzles.

Q. HOW MANY GOLD BLOCKS?
480. You'll never fully complete the game unless you're prepared to pay a small fortune in toys.

EXPANSION CITY

We can't review *LEGO Dimensions* without discussing its many add-on packs. There are three types in total: Fun Packs, Team Packs and Level Packs, and prices range from £14.99 to £29.99. Fun Packs feature a character and an item and range from Bart Simpson and his Gravity Sprinter to *The LEGO Movie*'s Emmet and his Excavator. Team Packs are the same, but feature two characters and two items, while Level Packs feature a single level, a mini-figure and two items. Needless to say, all these extra expansions will allow you to activate the separate worlds as well as unlock some of the locked areas in the main game. A complete Wave 1 (of four) will currently set you back over £250, so make sure you have deep pockets.



clever puzzles with multiple keystones needing to be switched between.

And the adventure itself is cracking fun, with *Batman*, Gandalf and Wyldstyle hopping through various dimensions as they attempt to rescue their friends. Each level is based on a large number of the available expansion packs, including *The Simpsons*, *Doctor Who*, *Scooby Doo*, *Ghostbusters* and *Back To The Future* and they all feature their own mash-ups, so the *Ghostbusters* level sees Venkman and co being captured by General Zod. It works far better than it should, thanks to a clever original script that's packed with funny in-jokes and deftly ties the universe hopping together. The story isn't the greatest – villain Lord Vortech (a hammy Gary Oldman) wants to combine all the different universes together – but the solid voice acting and playful banter holds it all together.

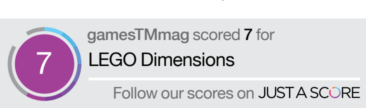
In addition to the enjoyable main story mode, *LEGO Dimensions* features a large number of hub worlds, based on the many available franchises, with the caveat being you can't enter them unless you have the a character from the relevant universe. This means that only DC Comics, *The LEGO Movie* and *The Lord Of The Rings* are available straight out of the box, but they're filled with plenty to do. They all look the part as well and you'll be itching to explore them. In fact, they're so good that you'll most likely want to buy additional packs so that you can explore the other worlds and this is where *LEGO Dimensions* begins to show its ugly side.

For the last ten years *LEGO* games have had tremendous replay value due to the many mini figures and gold blocks that are hidden throughout the game. It's impossible to see everything in a *LEGO* game during the first play through because certain areas are always locked until you've collected enough studs to unlock the relevant character. Sadly, we're now expected to pay extra for an experience that used to be part of the main package. Like *Skylanders*, you're constantly reminded of the figures you haven't bought and it gradually begins to feel that a large part of the game is locked off, something we can't come to terms with, no matter how good the core game is. *LEGO Dimensions* may be one of the most entertaining *LEGO* games yet, but it's going to massively disappoint the hardcore fans that have helped to turn it into such a popular series in the first place. A great game hampered by a new model.

ENHANCED
IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

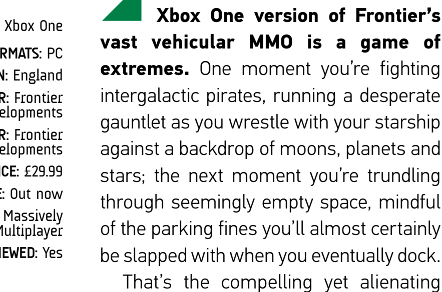
PORTAL POWER: The Portal is a strong edition, greatly changing the way puzzles are treated in the game. The puzzles are perhaps a little too complicated for younger fans to fully understand.

VERDICT
AN ENJOYABLE LEGO GAME, WITH A MEAN PAY WALL



HIGHS AND LOWS ON THE FINAL FRONTIER

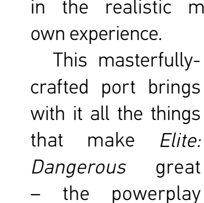
Elite: Dangerous



FORMAT: Xbox One
OTHER FORMATS: PC
ORIGIN: England
PUBLISHER: Frontier Developments
DEVELOPER: Frontier Developments
PRICE: £29.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: Massively Multiplayer
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

BETTER THAN: STRIKE SUIT ZERO

WORSE THAN: EVE ONLINE



Much like its PC incarnation, the Xbox One version of Frontier's vast vehicular MMO is a game of extremes. One moment you're fighting intergalactic pirates, running a desperate gauntlet as you wrestle with your starship against a backdrop of moons, planets and stars; the next moment you're trundling through seemingly empty space, mindful of the parking fines you'll almost certainly be slapped with when you eventually dock.

That's the compelling yet alienating dichotomy at the heart of *Elite: Dangerous* – the majestic and the mundane weaved together amid a vast universe of smuggling, trade and combat. Dogfights remain an important part of proceedings, but you'll spend most of the time getting to grips with the minutia of space travel. Plotting your path to a new system; diverting power between shields, weapons and engines; learning how to dock your ship without wrecking it. It's a freedom-rich take on high science fiction, but one that often loses itself completely in the realistic machinations of its own experience.

This masterfully-crafted port brings with it all the things that make *Elite: Dangerous* great – the powerplay between factions, the freedom to build a career unhindered by the confines of a traditional class system, the sheer thrill of piloting a ship – but it also smuggles many of the issues that held back the original version from greatness. Part of the game's inherent charm comes from its seemingly obtuse nature, but by throwing a player into a vast universe with little or no direction, the game creates a needlessly steep learning curve. The fact its useless tutorials and hint system haven't been improved or revamped in the transition to a new platform is staggering.

WORLDWIDE
TAKING GAMING ONLINE

OPEN UNIVERSE: *Elite* can be tackled either in Solo or Open Play. Playing online is the better of the two; inhabiting a world shaped by the players around you makes exploring it that more exciting.

Close Quarters Combat aims to temper this by giving one of *Elite*'s best features – dogfighting – its own bespoke mode. It's not exactly bursting with variety (there's only deathmatch, TDM and CTF variants and the handful of maps to swoop through), but its PvP wares do have a moreish ruthlessness about them that smack of *Destiny*'s merciless Crucible.

The expansive main campaign runs at a native 1080p/60fps, giving every ship, nebula and hyperspace jump a captivating presentation. The control scheme maps well to the Xbox controller too, providing access to every facet of your vessel. *Elite: Dangerous* offers an experience like no other, it's just a shame the sins of the past still sting as painfully as they did on PC.

Above: Controlling your ship is one challenge, but docking with a space station or larger vessel is quite another. You'll be lucky if you get away with just a fine.

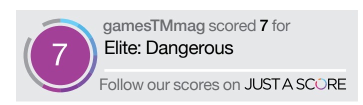


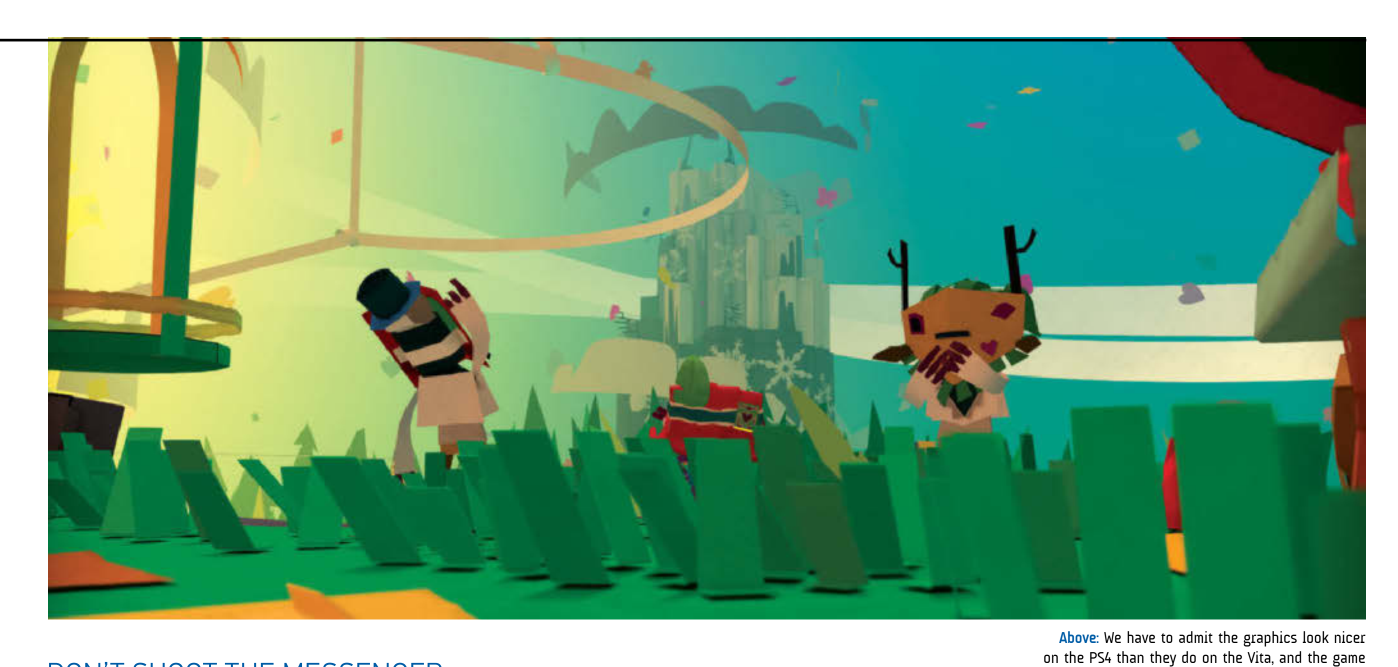


Above: *Elite* loves making you aware of its internal processes. Want to jump to a new system? Select your galaxy map and manually turn the ship.

VERDICT

GRAND IN SCALE, BUT STILL PATCHY IN EXECUTION





Above: We have to admit the graphics look nicer on the PS4 than they do on the Vita, and the game genuinely benefits from being 30fps, rather than 60.

DON'T SHOOT THE MESSENGER

Tearaway Unfolded

When it was first released on the PS Vita, *Tearaway* was much more than the game it was often compared to – *Little Deviants*. That game felt like a tech demo, a cautious exploration of the Vita's unique hardware. *Tearaway* was something else – an actual game that explored what the Vita could do. It used the back touch screen in an inspirational way; it made great use of the relationship it built up with the player's fingers, but did it without gimmickry.

So in transferring the game to the PS4, did the game lose any of its extremely format-reliant charm? In a word, yes. Where before you could use the touchpad to doodle, poke, tear and rip Media Molecule's papercraft world, in conjunction with a microphone to enhance the experience, the PS4 version just feels a bit forced.

Granted, it's been completely re-tooled to fit on the PS4 hardware and to the game's credit it does a fantastic job of teaching about all those DualShock 4 features you'd have forgotten about, but largely it dumbs down on the creativity the original game revelled in. The touchpad-based drawing sections, for example, feel hemmed in by the DualShock's more compact semi-screen. It's certainly functional, but we thought the core appeal of the original game was in its customisation – you can still customise your Messenger, but it just feels like a harsh omission on one of Media Molecule's core selling points.

The gyroscopic sections of the game remain as fun as ever and actually benefit from the DualShock pad. The light bar comes into good use too, as it hypnotises enemies in the environment and allows you to basically terraform the whole world. Like when the game was originally released, we're constantly impressed by the mechanical implementation of the gimmicks, but they are severely undercut by the overtly twee narrative, which can really take away from the impact of the world-building.

With all the smart ideas used up in the game's opening segments, the game very quickly becomes top-heavy. It can drag a little: if the twee thing isn't for you, there isn't enough going on to really pull you through the game's expansive mid-section. It's a problem Media Molecule's other games have never suffered from, but something other format-specific Vita hits did.

The result? A game that promises some really nice ideas and respectfully manipulates the PS4 hardware, but actually falls down a little before it can really become a *game*. It's an impressive tech demo on the PS4 and a good bit of fun for a younger audience, but serious gamers after a good mixture of challenge, story and mechanics may be left wanting.

FORMAT: PS4
OTHER FORMATS: Vita
ORIGIN: UK
PUBLISHER: Sony Computer Entertainment
DEVELOPER: Media Molecule
PRICE: £34.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-2
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN

LITTLEBIGPLANET KARTING





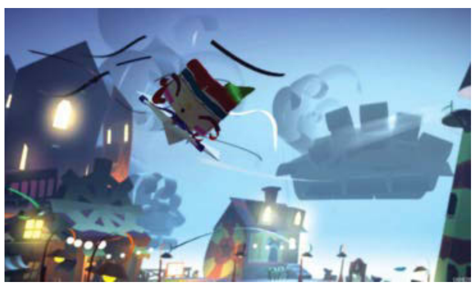
JOURNEY

WORSE THAN

FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

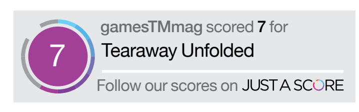
FOLDAWAY: The paper aesthetic and the way you can interact with this origami world is fantastic – it's the pinnacle of Media Molecule's search for the perfect art style.





VERDICT

A GOOD VERSION, BUT HEAD TO THE VITA FOR THE REAL DEAL



PLATINUM BOUNCES BACK

Transformers: Devastation

FORMAT: Xbox One
OTHER FORMATS: PlayStation 4, Xbox 360, PS3, PC
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Activision
DEVELOPER: Platinum Games
PRICE: £39.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

By all accounts, *Transformers: Devastation* should have been a high-speed disaster. A mess of twisted steel and discarded teenage dreams, the bright, epilepsy-inducing style and recognisable cast of Autobots and Decepticons nothing but a nostalgic wail in the wind, like a siren on the seas. But Platinum Games, the industry's leading action developer, has finally found form with licensed properties. Hollywood might have ravaged the corpse of *Transformers* down to its bare nuts and bolts, but don't write off *Transformers: Devastation* just yet, there's more to it than meets the eye. Huh, who'd have thought we'd have gotten that reference in there *totally* organically…

It's admittedly difficult to not just crumble into a heap of nostalgic delirium upon discovering that *Transformers: Devastation* isn't entirely awful. This is the *Transformers* that children of the Eighties have long been after a return of, only to be convinced by the Michael Bays of this world that they would never again receive. Inspired by the original Generation 1 seasons, *Transformers: Devastation* sees Platinum dive into its rich history in the action genre and straight-up lift some of its best mechanics and systems out to play again, though that isn't to say there aren't a few major shortcomings to be found.

The biggest point of contention? The length. Despite the age-old conversation, size really does matter – especially when you're dropping £40 – and there's little doubt many will find themselves disappointed when the credits roll after just five hours. This is clearly a game made on a tight budget; the majority of the action unfolding across two primary locations, while the variety of enemies you face is small to say the least. But what *is* to be found in *Transformers: Devastation*, for the most part at least, feels lovingly and luxuriously crafted.

The influence of Platinum's *Metal Gear Rising* and *Vanquish* on the speed and style of combat is clear, while fans of *Bayonetta* will immediately connect with *Devastation*'s take on Witch Time. By dodging an incoming attack at the last second, Focus will initiate, slowing down time and leaving enemies incredibly vulnerable to counter attacks. Have

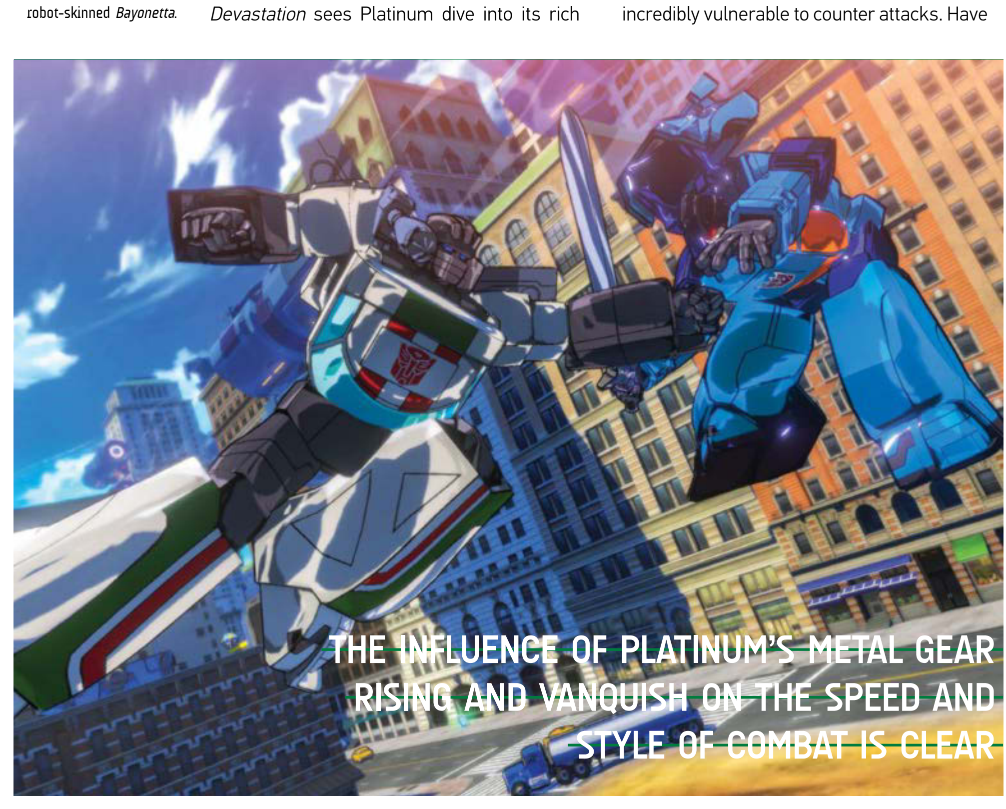
Below: Platinum brings its recognisable brand of kinetic energy and its sterling reputation for action to the table for *Devastation*. It's almost a robot-skinned *Bayonetta*.

Right: Activision has managed to sign up a load of the old (still alive) voice actors for *Transformers: Devastation*, and it makes a huge difference.

Below: The short game length and lack of variety is a real shame, and will leave many wanting more from Platinum's effort.



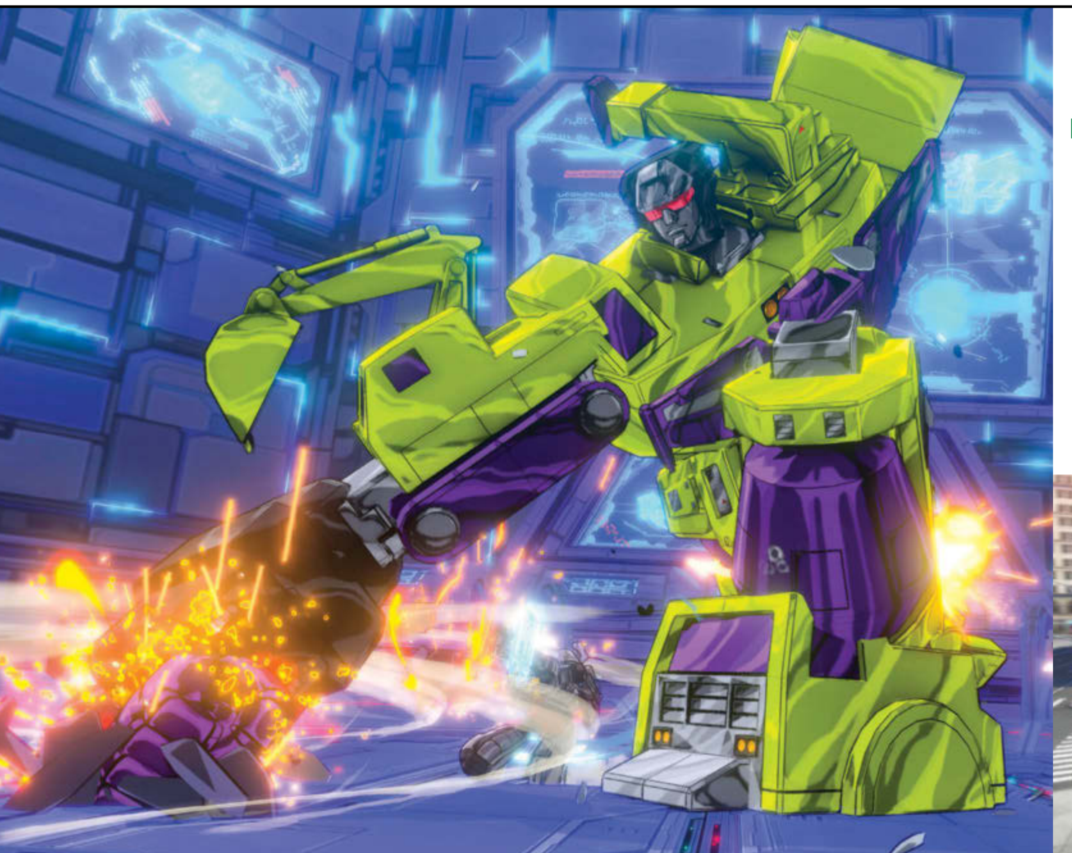
Below: The visual and audio design does a great job of dragging Gen1 fans into the action. This is a love letter to the good old days of *Transformers* we thought had been long forgotten.



THE INFLUENCE OF PLATINUM'S METAL GEAR RISING AND VANQUISH ON THE SPEED AND STYLE OF COMBAT IS CLEAR



Above: While the boss fights are entertaining, an erratic camera and often iffy hit boxes make them somewhat frustrating, though it's still fun to face off against your favourite Decepticons.



BATTLING BOSSES

Taking on the big bosses in *Devastation* is something of a double-edged sword. On the one hand, going into battle against one or two fan-favourite Decepticon bad guys is a dream come true – especially considering the art style here. On the other hand, they can be a giant pain in the arse. On higher difficulties in particular, the health and damage of bosses is ramped up so spectacularly that you'll feel hard done by, while you'll also spend plenty of time battling with the camera on some of the bigger enemies. There's a certain degree of luck to coming out alive, though that isn't to say you won't still love hitting Megatron in the face with a yellow love bug.



we seen this before? Sure, but that doesn't make it any less of a fun mechanic.

Thanks to High Moon Studios' efforts with the franchise over the last few years, we've come to expect robust shooting and driving mechanics to be included in a *Transformers* release, though smartly *Devastation* sees Platinum sticking to what it knows and does best. It's a brawler at heart, smartly weaponising the robots in disguise as you leap instantly between bipedal and vehicle positions, accompanied every time by a satisfying audio cue. Combos are completed with heavy-hitting vehicle-based assaults, while driving full speed at enemies can be chained into devastating shield-breaking and combo-starting melee assaults, so long as you can get the timing down.

There are five playable Autobots (Optimus, Bumblebee, Sideswipe, Wheeljack, and Grimlock) to choose between missions, each with its own unique feel, combat style and attributes, which brings a lot of variety to the melee combat. It'll also keep you engaged throughout the adventure, which is more than can be said about the disappointing inclusion of ranged weapons. With a criminal lack of lock-on and the crazy speed of the combat, especially when flying enemies come into play, the game would have been better off without it. Ranged combat will send you into

FAQs

Q. HAS PLATINUM SAVED TRANSFORMERS?
Almost. It's clear that with a bigger budget and more time the studio could have worked wonders.

Q. MICHAEL BAY MADE PROMISES BEFORE…
Yeah, but forget that guy! This is a faithful adaptation, with the correct audio cues and everything.

Q. WILL IT MAKE ME A FAN OF THE SHOW AGAIN?
Oh yeah, it will indeed! In fact, Season One-Four of Gen1 *Transformers* is still great to this day, go hunt it down already.

BETTER THAN: THE LEGEND OF KORRA

WORSE THAN: BAYONETTA

frenzies of wild fire, desperately swinging the camera around to keep up with the highly mobile foes; compared with the stellar melee combat, it feels like an afterthought.

That's a bit of a common theme for *Devastation*. Sure, Platinum has done what it does best to the core of it all, but so much of it feels like an afterthought. There's the ability to upgrade weapons and exchange credits for XP to drop across a range of stats, but the game does a legitimately awful job of explaining any of it. While the game moves with the pace and story ambition of a Season One G1 episode – which is to say, erratically – and the return of so many familiar voices is fantastic fan service, the reusing of environments will eventually begin to feel a little lazy.

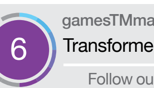
As we mentioned before, the length of the game does cause something of a problem, though this being a Platinum game the studio has done its best to increase playtime with the tease of multiple layers of difficulty and 50 short challenges. This feels like a cop-out before we even say it, but fans of the Gen1 era are going to get far more out of *Devastation* than anyone else. If you're just looking for the next great action game or are a Platinum fan, you might want to steer clear. The attention to detail is staggering for fans; little audio and visual cues will succeed in plastering a smile across your face, while the combat brings the Autobots and Decepticons to life like never before.

MISSING LINK
WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

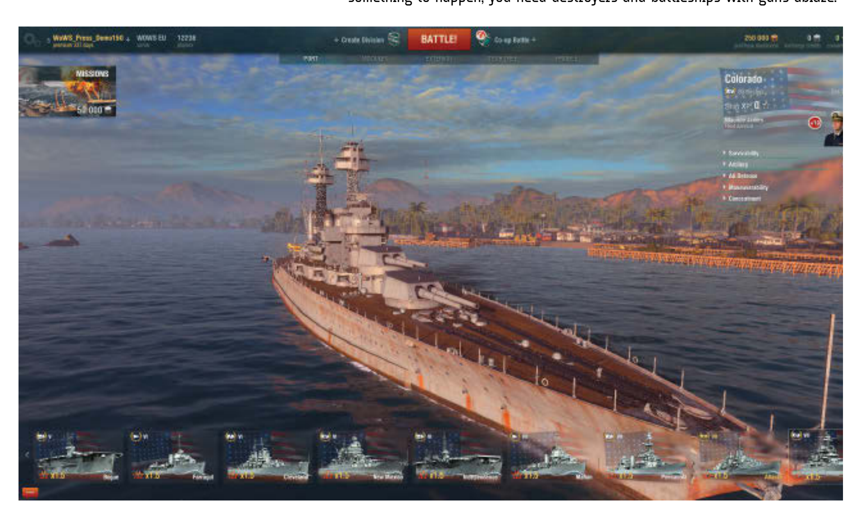
VARIETY: A little more variety in enemy types and location would have made *Devastation*'s short length easier to swallow.

After four deafening movies and an array of sometimes terrible videogames over the decade, *Transformers* has become a bit of a dirty word. *Devastation* moves with a kinetic energy we haven't seen in the series since the G1 days; it's fun, fluid and self-aware in all the right ways, but that doesn't make it a killer videogame. Considering the state of Platinum's last licensed title, *The Legend Of Korra*, not to mention the clear budget and time constraints from Activision, *Transformers: Devastation* could have been much worse. But then again, it could also have been much, much better.

VERDICT
SOLID, BUT COULD HAVE BEEN SO MUCH MORE.


gamesTMmag scored **6** for Transformers: Devastation
Follow our scores on JUST A SCORE

Below: Cooperation is key in *World Of Warships*, you can't just sit around in an aircraft carrier waiting for something to happen, you need destroyers and battleships with guns ablaze.





IN THE NAVY

World Of Warships

Wargaming's latest military bonanza suffers slightly at the hands of its predecessors and its subject matter, despite being one of the boldest and most intriguing online games available. It's a shame, really, that it lacks the frenzied, intense approach of *World Of Warplanes* and the infallible, innate playability of *World Of Tanks*. Every sortie is quite a slow burner, resulting in some maps being a little bit of a slog as you drag a lumbering battleship through archipelagos in order to reach your objective. There's no jumping straight in and blowing up your mates.

Limitations of the subject matter aside, though, *World Of Warships* surpasses its predecessors both in terms of its historical aspirations and in terms of its customisation and depth. There are four different classes of vessel available – destroyers, cruisers, battleships and aircraft carriers – each of which comes complete with a selection of different ships based on real examples of the time. Naturally, due to their varying attributes, each class of ship offers a different play style to the next. This variety in attributes is a welcome one, as it essentially leaves you with four different ways to play.

There's the usual bevy of upgradeable components that, if you've played *Tanks* or *Warplanes*, you'll be quite familiar with and Wargaming has included the ability to upgrade your ship's captain, too, adding a new layer of customisation. Combat itself is technical and difficult to master – you're constantly having to work out the trajectory of your shots and offsetting that against the distance you are from the enemy. With larger ships, the guns hit hard, but take a long time to reload, meaning that mashing the fire button leaves you open to counter attack.

The technical nature of the battles you embark on may feel slow and complicated, but after a few hours with the game it'll start to click. It's frustrating at times when you're stuck with a team that doesn't work together, as the different classes of ships mean that cooperation is key. You can't just sit around in an aircraft carrier – you need destroyers and battleships with guns fully ablaze.

As with all online games, your experience will no doubt be affected by those around you. When you're on a good server with a good group of sailors, *World Of Warships* can be extremely enjoyable, offering a more tactical and considered battle experience than its forbears. The amount of content available is quite astonishing, although you'll scream at the paywall from time to time, as it takes forever to accrue enough in-game cash to buy a lot of the top-end gear. As far as free-to-play goes, this is deeper than most and will become quite the time sink if you have the patience to master it.

FORMAT: PC
ORIGIN: Russia
PUBLISHER: Wargaming
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: Free-to-play (microtransactions)
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: Massively Multiplayer
MINIMUM SPEC: Windows XP or newer, Dual-core CPU (2.6GHz), 2GB RAM, 30GB HDD space
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

BETTER THAN

ENEMY FRONT





WORLD OF TANKS

WORSE THAN

FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

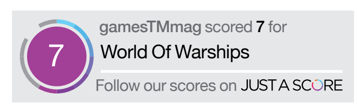
REALISM REDEFINED: The Wargaming team in St Petersburg used real schematics and blueprints at the 3D modelling stage to ensure that every ship in the game is extremely accurate.





VERDICT

DEEP AND WELL MADE, IF NOT IMMEDIATELY EXCITING



HIT SOME BODY

NHL 16





Above: Cloth and pad physics, given greater attention in last year's game, remain as realistic and impressive as before. *NHL* is one of EA Sports' stronger looking games on top of being its fastest.

It feels so good to enjoy *NHL* again. The frustrating, glitchy, hurl-your-controller-across-the-room gameplay of *NHL 15* has been, for the most part, rectified and improved upon with some interesting new elements and the welcome return of old favourites. As your winger makes the pass you actually told him to, your defenseman storms across the ice to execute a brutally satisfying hit against the boards and players are actually where they're supposed to be, goddammit, this isn't as good as NHL has ever been but it's getting there.

Series regulars will be pleased to see the return of classic modes that were either absent or just plain irritating on last year's version, like Online Team Play. The EA Sports Hockey League is back, which allows you to create your own character for online match-ups, and there's the new Hockey Ultimate Team.

This abundance of features means that there's a fair amount to get your head around on the welcome menu but you can still jump straight into tournaments, or get into the long, long season modes. The improved gameplay and skippable shifts (only occasionally functional in 15) mean that the Be A Pro mode is just as addictive but infinitely more enjoyable. A new feature showing your experience points as you get them (and explaining why they're being added and subtracted) is a welcome addition, which brings us to the on-ice advice. Lines tell you where to pass (and where your pass is actually going), advise you on bouncing the puck off the boards, and when would be a good time to shoot.

This feature can be switched off, but for first-time players it will obviously be a great help given the speed and endless clattering violence, although it obviously gives you less time to make guests feel like they're being punished for something.

It's also worth pointing out that the advice isn't totally idiot proof, and your players are still prone to sudden fits of not doing what you want. Meanwhile, the Be A GM mode prompts you to go deeper into your team's organisation, interacting with your talent scouts, your AHL affiliate team and your players' morale.

Beyond simply fixing the errors of its predecessor, NHL 16 offers more than enough to justify the upgrade. For fans of the series, this is an essential purchase, and for first timers, this is a great opportunity to get hooked.

FORMAT: Xbox One
OTHER FORMATS: PS4
ORIGIN: Canada
PUBLISHER: EA
DEVELOPER: EA Canada
PRICE: £39.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-12
ONLINE REVIEWED: No

BETTER THAN

NHL 15





WORSE THAN

NHL 94

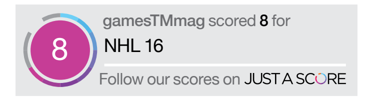
MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

SHUT UP: The commentators are dull and repetitive. Slightly less so than last year, but sweet Jesus, be quiet. It's the one area of presentation *NHL 16* is really let down by.

VERDICT

NHL HAS BOUNCED BACK



Below: The number of teams available is very impressive with sides from around the world and national teams available on top of the famous NHL sides in North America. It nearly rivals *FIFA* for selection.





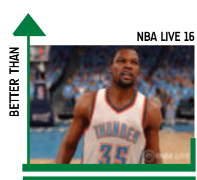
HE GOT GAME… MOSTLY

NBA 2K16

FORMAT: Xbox One
OTHER FORMATS: PS4, PS3, Xbox 360, PC
ORIGIN: USA
PUBLISHER: 2K Sports
DEVELOPER: Visual Concepts
PRICE: £44.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-4 (2-10 online)
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

BETTER THAN

NBA LIVE 16





NBA 2K15

WORSE THAN

It was destined to happen at some point. The grand and often incomparably brilliant *NBA 2K* series, the jewel of sports games, has finally shown a wobble in its bounce. While it's still unquestionably a sports sim of elite quality, its usually universal high standards of execution are not quite at the level we've come to expect from a franchise that has been staggeringly consistent over the past decade or so.

The wobble comes in the form of Livin' Da Dream, a narrative-heavy game mode written and directed by Spike Lee that aims to bring more life and character to the series' traditional MyCareer offering. Lee's script sees you play as Frequency Vibrations (Freq), a basketball prodigy who you must guide through high school, college, the NBA draft and, hopefully, a successful professional basketball career.

Unfortunately, the writing is turgid to a point that goes well beyond cliché and becomes something that approaches offensive levels of predictability and stereotyping. Acting performances are near-universally weak and the way in which you're afforded the chance to interact and influence Freq's future is so lazily and boorishly implemented that you start to wish failure upon him. Thankfully, if you're not typically someone that engages with MyCareer then you can lick your lips in anticipation of what you're about to play. When the shackles of amateur narrative production are removed and the focus sits squarely on the action playing out on court, *NBA 2K16* is a delight and, once again, puts its sports game peers to shame when it comes to quality of animations, in-game presentation and depth and sophistication of play.

NBA 2K16 is masterful at providing a re-creation of what we expect to see from a TV broadcast. Camera angles, commentary, crowd reaction, cheerleaders and all the extraneous lighting and imagery associated with the NBA is present and correct. Superlative presentation is flanked by improvements to gameplay, particularly to AI defensive adaptability. Using your knowledge of basketball tactics is the only consistent way of unlocking high percentage shooting opportunities. What's more, opponents noticeably react to your gameplan during a match, which imbues a sense of intelligence to proceedings in that the game is actively trying to beat you by learning how you operate, rather than simply adopting a generic defensive approach. If only all sports sims were this smart…

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

MORE FREEDOM: Replacing Livin' Da Dream with something less restrictive would have improved the single-player experience enormously. We don't play sports games to be bored by poor narrative.



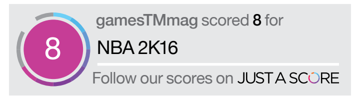
Above: The on court action has never been better, but you'll need to make sure you play away from Livin' Da Dream to make the most of it.



Above: Lofty AI intelligence does an excellent job of making you feel as though you're playing with real people.

VERDICT

THE BASKETBALL IS STUNNING, THE NARRATIVE IS NOT





Left: The game looks absolutely fantastic and the characters are still packed with charm. The desire to make your Skylanders more powerful and deadly is partly what will keep you playing.

SHOULD'VE STUCK TO PLATFORMING…

Skylanders SuperChargers

Games that try to add something new to their genre can go one of two ways. The first is a glowing review, in which we gush over the new mechanics. The other is a sadder tale, of why the developers should've have just stuck with what they knew. Unfortunately here, it's definitely the latter.

The big change this year is the addition of the new vehicular sections, which require you to plonk a plastic vehicle onto your portal in order to play. In the game, this translates into racing areas, driving missions and even small levels in which you pilot the car, collect shiny things and fight enemies. However, these driving sections are entirely by-the-numbers – there's nothing really fresh or exciting here and while you can level up your vehicles with improved weapons, engines, armour and wheels, the customisation isn't enough for us to actually *care* about the vehicles. With previous *Skylanders* titles, part of the enjoyment came from the personality of the little toys and their in-game representations; it's hard to get emotionally invested in a car.

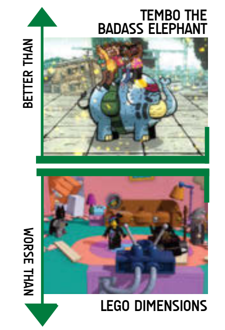
The good thing about the addition of vehicles is that there is a lot more game to play without needing to purchase extra toys. Unlike previous games, which required Skylanders of a particular element to pass through gates, this time it is the driving sections that are stuck behind paywalls. This means you only have to buy two other vehicle types to see the whole game.

In all likelihood, though, you won't even bother, because these levels are far inferior to the rest of the game. In fact, if *SuperChargers* had dropped the driving sections entirely, we may actually be saying that this is the best *Skylanders* game to date. The level design is good. Gravity gates will have you platforming upside down, shrink and grow rays change the way you move through levels and defeat enemies and old stories in a library are told in a hand-drawn side-scrolling platform design. These twists in gameplay are regular, which helps to keep things fresh. Add the brilliantly-designed plastic toys to the mix and you've got a title that will entertain the younger members of your family.

It's a shame that the driving, flying and underwater sections quickly become so dull. There's a fun game hidden in here – if you don't mind trudging through a vehicular challenge every now and then.

FORMAT: Xbox One
OTHER FORMATS: PS4, Wii U, PS3, Wii, Xbox 360, iOS
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: Activision
DEVELOPER: Vicarious Visions
PRICE: £39.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 2-4
ONLINE REVIEWED: No

TEMBO THE BADASS ELEPHANT



LEGO DIMENSIONS

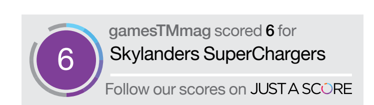
SYNTHESIS

BRINGING GENRES TOGETHER

DRIVING AND JUMPING: *SuperChargers* does its best to bring vehicular exploration and combat into the *Skylanders* world of jumping and fighting, but sadly it just isn't interesting enough to care about.



THIS YEAR'S GIMMICK IS ALSO THE GAME'S DOWNFALL

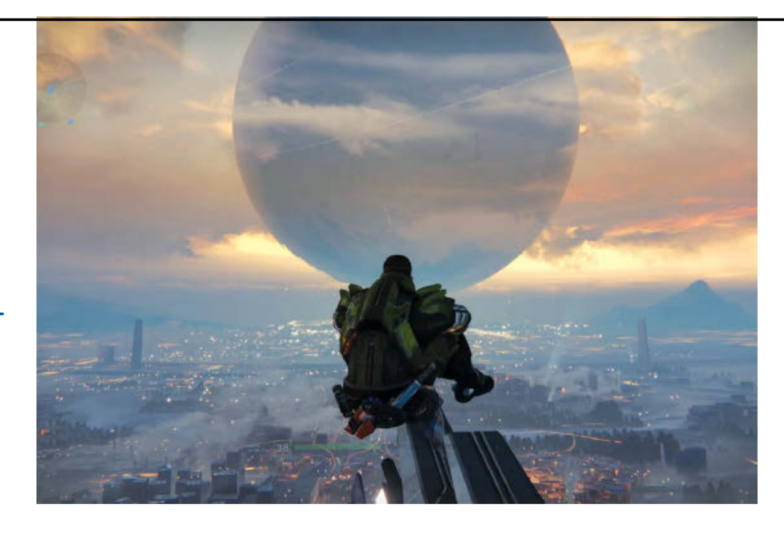




Above: While you will take part in standard driving sections, these mini-levels also pop up, and have you scooting around in your car trying to shoot enemies. Sadly, they're not very fun.

STARTING TO FIND ITS RHYTHM

Destiny: The Taken King



It's quite easy to look at all of the things that Bungie has altered for *The Taken King* and honestly wonder why it didn't just do all of it the first time round. All the bizarre systems, the lack of a coherent story, the repetition – all of it has been identified and destroyed, resulting in a more enjoyable, more considered experience overall. Rather than just being a set of new missions, a couple of Strikes and a Raid, this update represents a considerable shift that even goes as deep as the game's previously under-baked RPG mechanics.

Despite its undeniable playability and superb FPS credentials, vanilla *Destiny* relied far too much on 'Go here, defend this, kill that' missions that began to feel like a grind towards the end of the story. In *The Taken King* this near laziness has greatly subsided. After the first cinematic – of which there are far more than in the original game, greatly helping the story to amble along – you spend the first few minutes of the first mission in relative peace, which displays a greater level attention to pacing than we're accustomed to from *Destiny*. This runs throughout – there's even a stealth mission later on.

The best decision Bungie has made, though, is doing away with the ill-conceived Light system of old – you know, the one that meant the only way to level past a certain point was to grind for *very* specific gear – and replacing it with one that combines your overall Attack and Defense stats to generate a Light level. It's an easy-to-measure system against other players, and certain missions now come with warnings, allowing you to judge whether or not your Light level is high enough so as to avoid an arse-kicking.

Another great new addition is a Quest tracking system, allowing you to keep on top of the errands you have to run. There are multiple branching paths now that allow you to undertake *Taken King* missions here and there, as well as taking on side quests for the three new subclasses and resident of the Tower.

Ultimately, however essential we say this update is, it's only relevant if you're a *Destiny* sceptic and haven't already upgraded. If this is you, pick it up – the price is steep but there's a huge amount of content here, plus you won't fall too far behind. If you're a new player, thanks to this update this is now one of the best 'shared-world' experiences out there – one that you'll find hard to put down due to its stellar FPS mechanics, enormous scope and undeniable progression.

FORMAT: PlayStation 4
OTHER FORMATS: Xbox One, PlayStation 3, Xbox 360
ORIGIN: USA
PUBLISHER: Activision
DEVELOPER: Bungie
PRICE: £40.00
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: Massively Multiplayer
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes



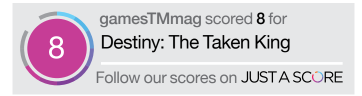
ENHANCED

IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

STORY: *The Taken King* follows on from the events of the previous two *Destiny* expansions, but due to the increased amount of cutscenes the narrative is far easier to absorb.

VERDICT

AN ESSENTIAL UPDATE AND A SENSIBLE IMPROVEMENT







Above: Bungie has added a new subclass for each of the Guardian classes in *The Taken King*. Our Titan earned the Sunbreaker class, complete with new skill trees and an awesome new special ability.

Above: That Anti-Love stuff we mentioned earlier scattered a bunch of your mates across the galaxy. Locate five bunnies/frogs/etc to unlock the next area.

A SPACEFARING ROMANCE BEST ENJOYED WITH COMPANY

Lovers In A Dangerous Spacetime

It may have the 'L' word in its title, but should you wander all doe-eyed into the metroidvania depths of *Lovers In A Dangerous Spacetime*, there's a good chance you'll get your heart broken... or see it blown to space dust. Whether you're tackling this cartoon caper in co-op or solo with an AI friend, Asteroid Base's cutesy curio is anything but affectionate.

At the helm of a circular starship with four cannons, a shield, a heavy blaster and a map, *Lovers* tasks you with scouring four interstellar campaigns. Turns out a ton of Anti-Love (yes that's a thing, just go with it) has seeped into our reality and it's up to you, in the guise of a tiny astronaut to head out into the stars, rescue your stranded compadres and, you know... ahem... spread the love.

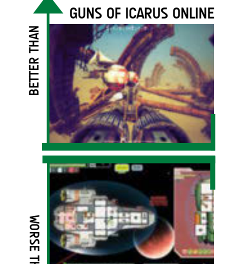
On face value *Lovers* might look like a top-down shooter in the *Velocity* vein, but it's more of a crisis-management simulator with a picture of *FTL* on its bedroom wall – an on-the-fly puzzler where jumping between each part of your ship is just as much a juggling act as dealing with the death-spewing enemies floating outside. Your ship appears as a cross-section, with each element controlled by a different terminal. Thing is, you can only control one thing at a time so hilarity/death soon ensues as you try and pick the best tool for the job.

In solo and co-op play this conjures two very different experiences. Since you've only got one pair of human hands when playing on your lonesome, *Lovers* offers an AI companion to the mix. This feline/canine second mate can be commanded and thankfully your li'l buddy is a crack shot on the cannons, but they're not allowed to pilot the ship. Solo play is often the most frustrating of the two modes – something made all the more galling by unpredictable difficulty spikes.

Lovers was clearly designed with the romance of co-operation in mind. When tackled with a friend (local only, sadly), the game finds its stride. Where boss encounters often descend into a run-and-gun escapes during single-player, they sing with a bud in tow. *Lovers* becomes a duet of cannon fire and drifting manoeuvres as you flit between the ship's features. Add in a poppy techno soundtrack that never grates and you've got a memorable indie title that shines in company but falters without.

FORMAT: Xbox One
OTHER FORMATS: PC
ORIGIN: Toronto, Canada
PUBLISHER: Asteroid Base
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £11.99 (Xbox One), £10.99 (Steam)
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-2
ONLINE REVIEWED: No

BETTER THAN
GUNS OF ICARUS ONLINE



WORSE THAN
FTL

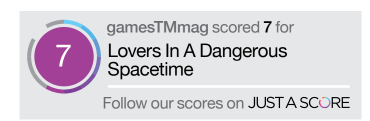
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WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

XP SYSTEM: You can upgrade each terminal to change its properties, but these are reset after each campaign. An XP system would suit it far better, enabling you to tailor your ship to suit your playstyle.

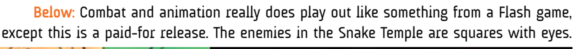
VERDICT

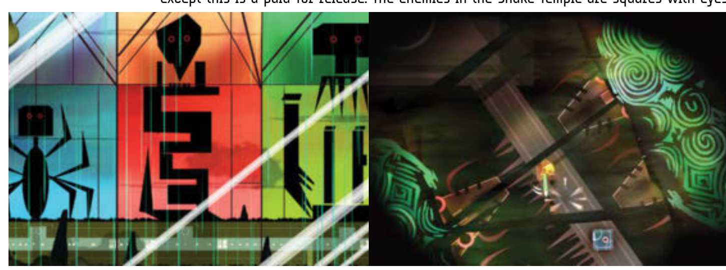
FUN AS TWO, A CHORE AS ONE



BESTIAL IN NOTHING BUT NAME

Animal Gods


Below: Combat and animation really does play out like something from a Flash game, except this is a paid-for release. The enemies in the Snake Temple are squares with eyes.



Steam is full of games of all shapes and sizes; a side-effect of the ease with which it is to publish on the service, perhaps, but a double-edged sword too. It gives games like *Animal Gods* the potential to be published without the restrictions of old and reach an incredibly large audience. But by that same virtue there is a much larger number of games vying for a slice of the pie, and *Animal Gods* just cannot compete with many other titles on the platform.

Here's a *Zelda*-esque top-down adventure game, tied together by a simple and uninspired tale. You'll be pit against individual temples, each focusing on a particular ability or playstyle. One might unlock a new dashing ability, another will hand you a sword but whatever the case each element is used very simply, offering a light puzzle element. So reliant is each section on a particular mechanic that it becomes overused, and since they aren't especially fun to use – they are functional, nothing more – even a single temple ends up feeling arduous. There's no real sense of combining these new abilities later on down the line, either, which might've at least added some sense of dynamism to the game.

Matters aren't resolved much by the simplistic animations or graphics, ultimately resembling something you'd have played a decade ago on Miniclip. It's not that it's bad, only that it's amateurish. It might seem cruel, perhaps, to criticise a game clearly developed by novices simply for not offering the same degree of quality we regularly see birthed from the current golden age of indie development but there's no avoiding the fact that *Animal Gods* is up against a lot of competition – much of it better produced. The visuals offer a pleasant enough experience, but where it might appear to offer a sense of atmosphere – perhaps even of foreboding – none of that really carries over into the actual game. Notes of explicit exposition are dotted around – some loosely hidden down intentional dead ends – to bridge together some semblance of a story, but it simply fails to draw you into the events.

As a beginner's effort, the work is commendable since there are very few bugs or faults with the game, but at the same time it is so limited in terms of features that there aren't really all that many things that *could* go wrong. Perhaps the wealth of indie content available has turned us into snobs, but by putting the game up for sale it automatically opens itself up to such comparison – and it just doesn't offer a comparable quality. In truth there's no real ire to be aimed at *Animal Gods*, it is neither offensive nor agreeable – and often providing no emotion is often worse than creating a negative one.

FORMAT: PC
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: Still Games
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £6.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
MINIMUM SPEC: Intel i5 2.4GHz CPU, 4GB RAM, Intel HD Graphics 3000, 600MB HDD space
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

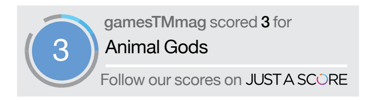


MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

FIXIN' IT: If a game can't feel fun in its mechanics alone then it's already lost; if *Animal Gods* at least got that right and the basic story and visuals could have been forgiven.






Above: Though it uses very simplistic shapes for its art style, there are times where *Animal Gods* does look quite pleasant, but it's not on the right side of artistic to stand out enough.





Left: You can learn emotions in *Happy Home Designer*, just like you could in *New Leaf*. Here though they're slightly less useful: in *New Leaf* they could be used to interact with other players visiting your village but visits are no longer a feature.

HOME IS WHERE THE SPARK ISN'T

Animal Crossing: Happy Home Designer

***Happy Home Designer* is a release Nintendo will be watching with great interest.** The game itself is one thing, but Nintendo is hopeful its success will trigger a new craze: amiibo card collecting. It's a shame, then, that this focus on NFC gimmickry has come at the gameplay's expense.

Players create their own *Animal Crossing* villager and are immediately chucked into a new job at Nook's Homes, a home design firm run by Tom Nook. The town's animal residents each have home design or improvement work that needs doing, so it's up to you to have a chat with them then get to work creating their dream home.

The majority of kudos reserved for *Happy Home Designer* should be aimed at its design system, which is a complete joy to use. In previous *Animal Crossing* games arranging furniture in your home was a time-consuming affair, as your character had to physically push, pull and turn each item, slotting it into place.

FORMAT: 3DS
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Nintendo
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £34.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A



This time everything's been given a complete overhaul: players choose items from a Sims-style catalogue and simply drag them around on a top-down plan of the house. What used to take hours to meticulously lay out can now be done in five or ten minutes. If all future *Animal Crossing* games don't use this system it'll be a massive step backwards.

The bad news is that there isn't much more to the game than this. Speak to an animal, design their house to their liking, head to the office then repeat it again. Occasionally, as you make more residents happy, you'll be given larger one-off tasks to do, like designing a school. These are little more than larger spaces, though, and still fit into the usual 'design something to a theme' remit.

The introduction of amiibo cards – of which there are 100 in the first series – is an interesting idea in theory but all they do is let you summon specific villagers. If Nintendo wants them to be collected by any more than a niche following of hardcore fans they're going to have to have more functionality than that.

WORLDWIDE
TAKING GAMING ONLINE

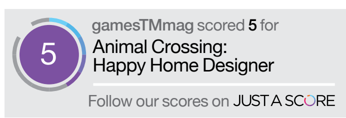
PHOTO SHARING: As in *New Leaf* you can take screenshots with the shoulder buttons. You're reminded you can share these photos on Miiverse or social networks using Nintendo's Image Share service.

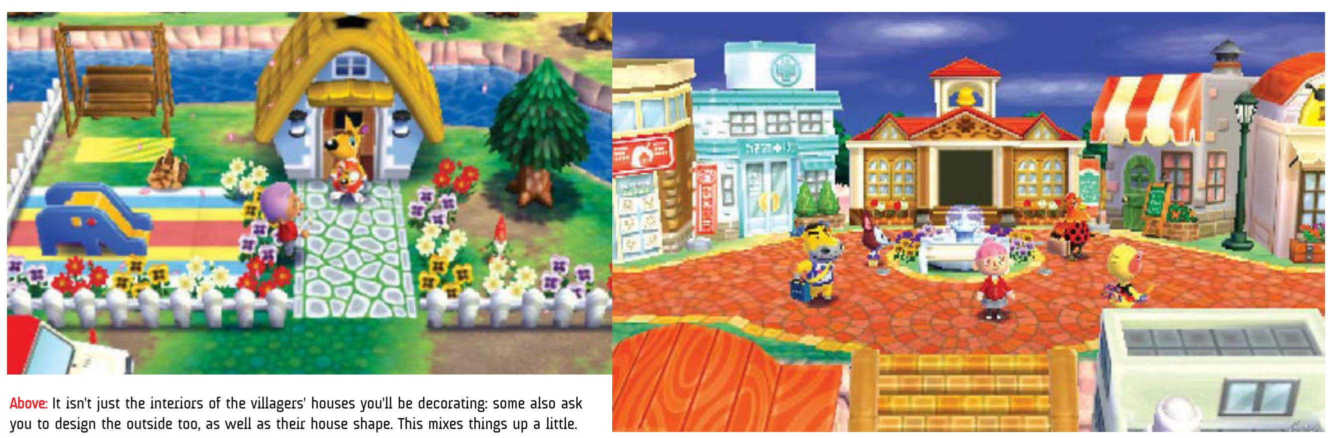
Ultimately, *Happy Home Designer* feels more like a mini-game from a main *Animal Crossing* title, albeit one that controls like a dream. As a cheaper eShop release designed to spark interest in collecting the cards it would have been fine, but as a full price game its one-trick-pony style is far too repetitive for some.



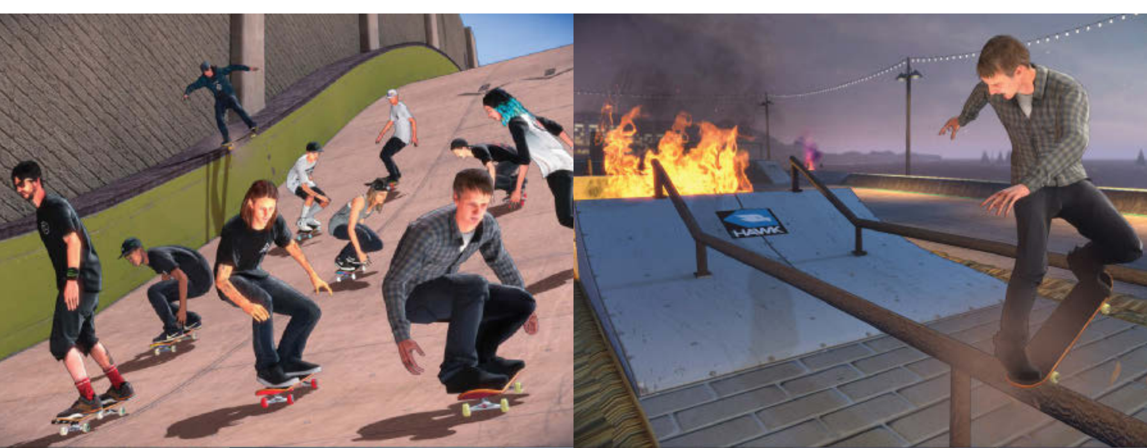
VERDICT

A MINI-GAME AT A MAXI-PRICE





Above: It isn't just the interiors of the villagers' houses you'll be decorating: some also ask you to design the outside too, as well as their house shape. This mixes things up a little.



Left: There's zero chance of anyone bailing – that is, falling over – off a grind, so zero risk. The careful balance of risk and reward, a core element of earlier games and one the hardcore fans love, is simply gone.



Right: The famed visual redesign of *THPS5* adds nothing, isn't as bold as, say, *Borderlands*' redesign and, generally speaking, doesn't stop the game from dropping to sub-60 frames per second. So why was it implemented, exactly? We'll likely never know.

NOT LIKE THIS, TONY. NOT LIKE THIS…

Tony Hawk's Pro Skater 5

Riddled with bugs and generally irritating failings, it's clear to see why so many of the gaming public have railed against *Tony Hawk's Pro Skater 5.* This is not the way it should be – the potential last hurrah for the series (with the Activision/Hawk contract running out by the end of 2015) should have been a triumphant return to the classic action of the 16-year-old original. It is not.

Beyond the superficial issues of glitches, clipping and skipping music, *Tony Hawk's Pro Skater 5* suffers from issues far worse than those on the surface: Robomodo's latest *Hawk's* game gets a hell of a lot of its skating action outright wrong. Turn away, fans – it's not pretty.

It starts with how you can't actually create a new skater. It goes through the fact that, with eight levels, *Tony Hawk's Pro Skater 5* actually has fewer skating arenas than *the original game*. You start to notice things like how you can't look up the in-game tracklist, featuring a wealth of pop-punk and the only thing about *THPS5* that seems to understand the appeal of the originals. Then the real problems hit.

FORMAT: PS4
OTHER FORMATS: Xbox One, PS3, Xbox 360
ORIGIN: USA
PUBLISHER: Activision
DEVELOPER: Robomodo
PRICE: £49.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-20
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes



It's not just that you physically can't bail during grinds, thus removing all risk from them. It's not just that the famed visual style change, made to be sure *THPS5* ran at 60fps at all times, doesn't do what it was implemented for. It's not just that, for a penny shy of £50, you're getting less than you did in games released over a decade ago.

ENHANCED

IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

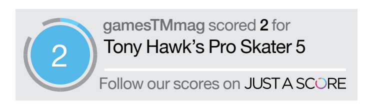
NOT REALLY: How Robomodo has managed to make a game demonstrably worse than its forebears is beyond us. This is one of the worst sequels we have ever seen.

It is *all* of that. It's all of that and more. It's a shallow create-a-park mode, making for a shared community of basic parks to supplement the poorly-designed original eight. It's a truly deep *lack* of understanding as to what makes a good skateboarding game.

Activision and Robomodo should, frankly, be ashamed of *Tony Hawk's Pro Skater 5*. If promises to fix the game are met and it, eventually, becomes a more faithful entry to the classic series, the Birdman's last outing will still go down in history as an absolute hatchet job. Even ignoring the bugs and glitches that pop up every other minute of play, this is a fundamental betrayal of a once-great series, and of the players who helped to make it what it was.

VERDICT

THE WORST CASE SCENARIO FOR A LAST HURRAH



TO ARMS!

Dragon Quest Heroes: The World Tree's Woe And The Blight Below

FORMAT: PS4
OTHER FORMATS: PS3 (JPN)
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Square Enix
DEVELOPER: Omega Force
PRICE: £39.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A



Every franchise needs a good all-star spinoff, right? *Final Fantasy* has *Dissidia*, *Zelda* has *Hyrule Warriors* and now *Dragon Quest* has *Heroes*. The *Hyrule Warriors* comparison is quite apt, actually, since both *Heroes* and *Warriors* share both the same developer and army-destroying gameplay popularised in Omega Force's *Dynasty Warriors* series.

While *Dynasty Warriors*' hack-and-slash DNA definitely shines through – you'll be using that bread-and-butter square, square, square, triangle combo *a lot* – there is something about *Heroes* that sets it apart from Omega's other titles. In fact, it's wrong to associate it fully with those games; for all intents and purposes *Dragon Quest Heroes* keeps its feet firmly in its RPG heritage. There are skill trees to upgrade, side quests to undertake and an alchemy/crafting system to master. It takes what is, superficially, a mindless button-masher and adds a significant level of depth and variety.

This variety extends to the game's characters, too. Of course, this being a Greatest Hits of the *Dragon Quest* franchise in terms of characters, it's fair to expect that there will be a strong cast of fighters and *Dragon Quest Heroes* delivers on this expectation. Be it cutting multiple enemies down with Terry's excellent sword skills or utilising Alena's passion for fisticuffs to unleash a DPS storm upon a boss, you'll find every archetypal JRPG class represented. It's worth mentioning that the characters introduced exclusively to *Heroes* don't feel like boring shoe-ins to drive the game's plot along.

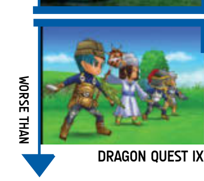
While the game delivers on its story, characters and systems, the quest objectives fall a little short. Outside of getting from point A to point B, defending an object or person, and destroying all enemies you won't find much variety. Thankfully, the game's boss fights do a good job to alleviate this with each one posing their own unique challenge such as attacking a specific weak point

While *Dragon Quest* is constrained a little by basic hack-and-slash action, it draws from its RPG roots to make itself a welcome outlier in the genre. Eliminating enemies is great fun and the game has undeniable and irresistible charm.

AS GOOD AS

HYRULE WARRIORS





DRAGON QUEST IX

WORSE THAN

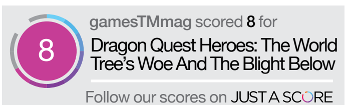
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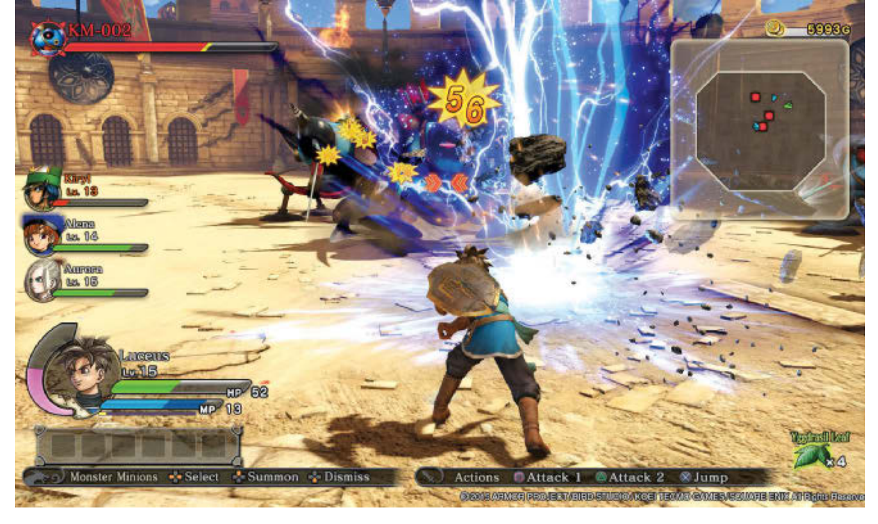
WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

DUNGEONEERING: While destroying armies of monsters, we longed for some old-fashioned dungeon crawling. Including the occasional dungeon would add some variety to quest objectives.



BLAZING A TRAIL FOR THE FRANCHISE IN A NEW DIRECTION







Above: Each character has their own pool of unique abilities. Terry can perform a Gust Slash, Jessica can electrify weapons with her whip and Alena can divide herself into three, for example.



This should go without saying, but the pixel art style and thumping electronic music soundtrack are two of *Party Hard*'s best qualities. They really help sell the idea and keep it engaging.

IT'S TIME TO...
OH, YOU KNOW THE REST

Party Hard

***Party Hard* tells a familiar tale: a bunch of arseholes have moved into the place next door; they care not for common decency and proceed to pump out banging trance tracks past 3am – meanwhile you sit in bed, bloodshot-eyed, wishing it would all stop and that your party aggressors would go straight to hell.** Look, we've all been there, it's a natural part of getting older and growing up. Where we differ from the protagonist to *Party Hard*, however, is that we've never been driven to donning a mask, crashing said party and murdering anyone with a penchant for shuffling. Not yet at least, damn students.

Like *Hotline Miami* before it, *Party Hard* is all about the thrill of the kill from a top-down perspective. Presented with a variety of party locales, you are tasked with moving from room to room and methodically murdering everyone in sight. Where it differs from the aforementioned game, however, is that getting caught sends your arse straight to jail. It becomes a night of patience; waiting for partygoers to slip away into bedrooms or bathrooms so you can introduce them to the razor's edge, or luring a group into elaborate traps.

A lot of the time, this is easier said than done. While most of the fun is to be had killing someone on the sly and hiding the body before anybody finds it, there's also a real twisted thrill to be found in trapping a bunch of teens in a room, setting it on fire, and slipping away to hide innocuously on the dance floor. Yes, *Party Hard* features a dedicated dancing button – game of the year contender, anyone? Perhaps, though *Party Hard* suffers from a lack of variety that keeps it from matching the *Hotline* heights that we've become so accustomed to.

Much like the repetitive beats thumping out of the speakers, the 12 levels can quickly descend into tedium. We don't know who these pixelated party planners are, but they sure have a lot of friends – and taking out the last ten or so can be a real drag. Ensuring your bodies aren't discovered is difficult enough as it is, as is keeping it together as you await the last stragglers to break off from their groups. Sure, you can poison the punch or stick a car in drive to maraud through a section of the house on your behalf, but some people just won't move away from the DJ, no matter what distractions you cause. When you've wasted 15 minutes watching two pixel people chat each other up but never move to the bedroom to seal the deal; it's these scenarios where getting caught by the cops or feds becomes a frustration instead of a punishment. It's almost like some people don't want to get murdered. Rude.

FORMAT: PC
ORIGIN: Russia
PUBLISHER: tinyBuild
DEVELOPER: Pinokl Games
PRICE: £9.99
RELEASE: Out Now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A



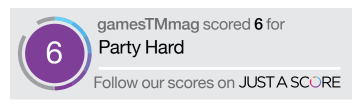
FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

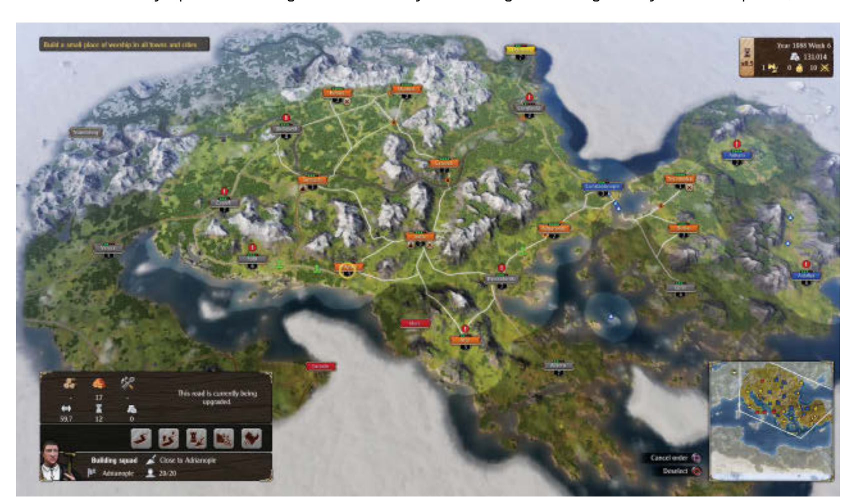
SUBVERTING EXPECTATIONS: Despite the presentation, you need to rely on stealth and pacing more than out and out murder to succeed.

VERDICT

A GOOD LAUGH, BUT COMES WITH A HANGOVER



Right: To track existing trades you have to scroll individually through each of your available traders, which is obviously a pain later in the game. There's no way of monitoring the flow of goods beyond close inspection, either.





A GAME OF THRONES

Grand Ages Medieval

Grand strategy is a funny old genre, a sort of Stockholm syndrome for the gaming world. As long as the mechanics are functional and your decisions tactical, then the longer you play the more forgiving you may find yourself becoming towards the game, a benefit that *Grand Ages Medieval* enjoys.

Favouring a more historical approach – akin to *Crusader Kings* and *Europa Universalis* rather than *Civilization* – the idea here is likely familiar to strategy fans: begin with a single settlement, build it up over the course of years and expand out, trading with other settlements and waging war with those who won't bend to your will. Here the focus is on trade, requiring you to specify five commodities for each city you construct. With only one trader per city, however, there's a necessary micromanagement, a fact that will appeal to players of this sort of game. It's admittedly a little more plodding than many of its competitors, but that somehow creates a greater sense of achievement once you've created an intricate web of supply and demand. There's no way to monitor every trade you have ongoing at a glance, however, nor is it possible to track a city's most popular resource. This makes it much harder to manage than it ought to be.

Diplomacy is a little lacking, too, with fairly limited interactions beyond paying for trade agreements and peace treaties; there's no real sense of political turmoil that you might feel in something like *Crusader Kings*, just opponents to attack or trade with as you see fit. Combat doesn't offer much in the way of strategy, either; the strength of your forces relies heavily on your trade income, but actual battles involve no greater thought than sending your army toward a threat.

But *still*. *Grand Ages Medieval* might suffer from its barebones features in some areas, but there's enough depth in others – city building and trade management – that it manages to draw upon an unexpected compulsion. It's rough around the edges and has spelling mistakes aplenty in dialogue and campaign text, but there's enough of an appeal that it has something to offer more methodical, thoughtful gamers. While the lack of information can be a barrier, the controls on PS4 aren't; menus are easy to navigate, time moves slowly enough that unit manipulation isn't a concern and there's even a handy 'added info' button to replace the tooltips on PC. Flawed it may be, but *Grand Ages Medieval* has just enough newness to draw in the PC crowd and is part of a completely under-served market on console, making it a fine option for those on PS4 craving more strategy.

FORMAT: PS4
ORIGIN: Germany
PUBLISHER: Kalypso Media
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £39.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-8
ONLINE REVIEWED: No



FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

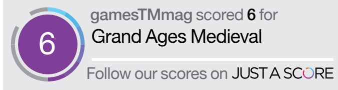
BREAD INTO WINE: Much of the game's depth and strategy comes from commodity trading, requiring careful city placement and trade organisation so as to create a vast network to supply your empire.





VERDICT

BASIC WHEN DRAWING COMPARISONS, COMPELLING ENOUGH





Left: Perhaps thankfully, players can choose between a new English language option or the original Japanese voice acting with subtitles. It's down to personal taste but the Japanese dialogue sounded more fitting to us given the game's J-horror feel.

SPOOK-SNAPPING RETURNS TO THE WEST

Project Zero: Maiden Of Black Water

The fifth game in Koei Tecmo's *Project Zero* series (known elsewhere as *Fatal Frame*) is that rarest of beasts: a third-party Wii U exclusive, albeit one for which Nintendo has opted to take over publishing duties.

The mysterious Mount Hikami is the setting this time. The forest area around the mountain is reportedly the place people go to commit suicide, and the game follows three different characters as they visit the forest for individual reasons. More important than these reasons is the fact that the forest is swarming with ghosts.

Those familiar with previous *Project Zero* games will roughly know what to expect here: once again you're armed with a 'Camera Obscura', a spook-spotting camera which lets you see ghosts and defeat the more hostile ones who try to attack you. Although the concept is familiar though, new elements have been introduced to freshen things up a bit.

Most notably, you can now aim your camera by moving the GamePad around like a real camera. While this works fantastically when your target is standing in front of you, it starts to become an issue when they start moving around, which they often do. If a ghost moves too far to either side, turning the GamePad to face it gets uncomfortable and, ultimately, hard to control. You'll find yourself using the traditional dual-analogue system instead.

Also new is the combat system. Every time you photograph a ghost, small orbs fly from it. These can be locked onto with your camera: lock onto five at once and take a photo to do more damage. At times you'll also be accompanied by AI-controlled partners: they're unarmed and can be damaged by ghosts, but they can be locked onto, adding a new layer of strategy.

The other major new mechanic is water, with a gauge measuring the wetness of your character's clothing. The idea is that the more soaked you are, the more you can attract, damage and be damaged by ghosts. In reality though, given that this is developed by the same studio behind the *Dead Or Alive* games, it's likely an excuse to get the female protagonists' shirts wet.

Impressive visuals aside, *Maiden Of Black Water* is unashamedly last-gen in design. It's creepy enough to give you sleepless nights and the story's better than that of previous games, but you'll have to put up with occasionally clunky controls if you want to enjoy this tale. It's just about worth it.

FORMAT: Wii U
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Nintendo
DEVELOPER: Koei Tecmo
PRICE: £39.99
RELEASE: 30 October (Japan: Out now)
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

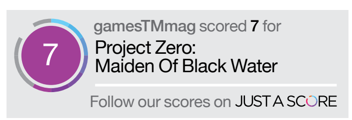
BETTER THAN
FATAL FRAME: MASK OF THE LUNAR ECLIPSE

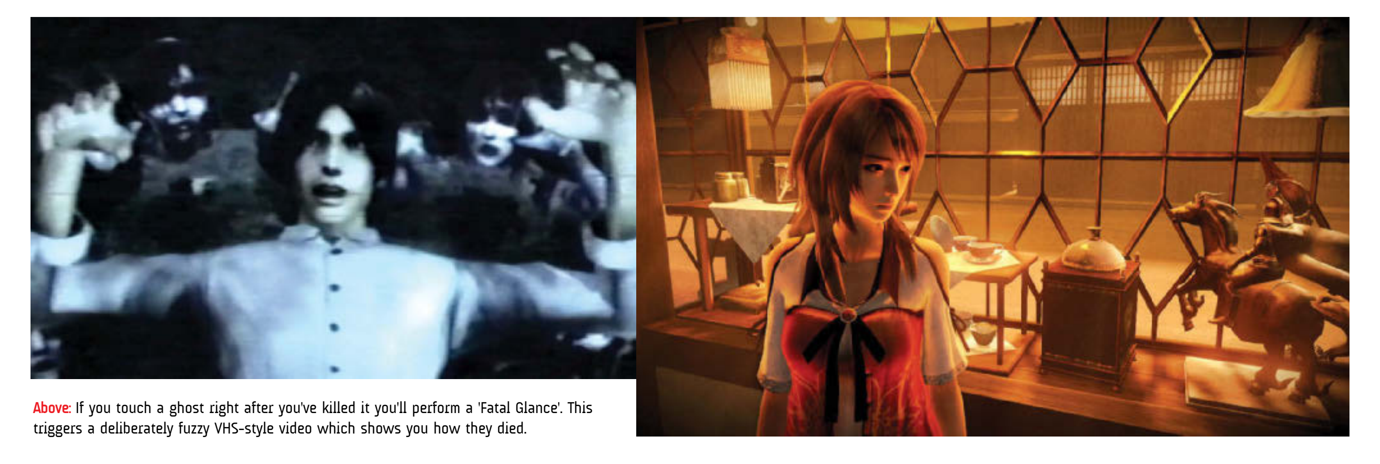
WORSE THAN
RESIDENT EVIL REVELATIONS

FINGERPRINT
WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

UNDEAD OR ALIVE: There's a secret bonus episode starring *Dead Or Alive*'s Ayane. She can't use the camera (ruddy youngsters) so she has to use her ninja skills to avoid the ghosts instead.

VERDICT
A CREEPY GAME WITH CREAKY CONTROLS





Above: If you touch a ghost right after you've killed it you'll perform a 'Fatal Glance'. This triggers a deliberately fuzzy VHS-style video which shows you how they died.

YOUR WALLET? LET IT GO...

Disney Infinity 3.0

Below: Not everyone is overly sold on the art style. It works well for the figures but often leaves the game looking somewhat dated.



FORMAT: PlayStation 4
OTHER FORMATS: PC, PlayStation 3, Wii U, Xbox 360, Xbox One
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: Disney
DEVELOPER: Avalanche Studios
PRICE: From £29.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-4
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

With *Star Wars* mania about to kick into overdrive all over again, what better time for Disney to leverage the brand than now? There's an argument to be made that competition in this sector is hurting games rather than improving them – as long as *Disney Infinity* and *LEGO Dimensions* butt heads over the same shelf space, the full potential of each crossover can never be truly achieved as each franchise looks to keep its strongest IPs exclusive. Still, for Disney to have what is likely to be the biggest brand this year on board, it's hard to rule *Infinity* out just yet.

It helps that *Infinity* is supported by two gameplay pillars rather than the one its rivals have. Playsets, which offer a more traditional toy/game experience, are once again vastly improved and the variety seen in these is refreshing after last year's *Avengers*-themed pack-in. Combat has nuance that wasn't there before and flows quite well, although the lack of feedback and anything close to a challenge may cause older players to doze off now and again. Both structurally and mechanically, however, you're looking at a confident leap over what the series has done before and as it darts between combat, shooting, vehicles and platforming, you can't help but appreciate that the breadth of possibilities in creative play have effectively made it across to the more traditional 'game' part of the package.

BETTER THAN
DISNEY INFINITY 2.0: MARVEL SUPER HEROES



WORSE THAN
MINECRAFT

The other part is Toy Box, which, as the name suggests, gives you the tools to create scenarios, puzzles, challenges, games and… well, more or less anything else you want. It's here that you realise the faux accessibility offered by Playset campaigns is simply born of simplicity, whereas the freedom and depth of the Toy Box shows off what the word truly means.

Younger players may be quite content to just assemble blocks into something they insist is a house, while advanced brainiacs can employ the enhanced logic system to create some truly incredible stages. Aside from unlocking the parts needed, you're free to unleash your creativity. Or not, if you'd rather. With a raft of UGC never more than a few button presses away, you're also free to be wowed by what other people have made if slaving over a level isn't for you.

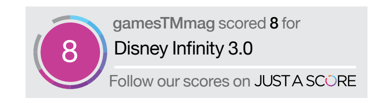
FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

TWO WAYS TO PLAY: Toy Box mode allows players to get creative with their own levels and challenges, while Playsets narrow the focus to tell stories in more traditional ways in popular universes.

While little has changed on the surface, it's fair to say that *Infinity 3.0* improves on both of the game's core pillars without really wobbling either. Of all the toys-to-life games, this one offers the best value for money thanks to ongoing free support via user-created Toy Box levels and, in a genre where cash is king, that could make a world of difference. Well, that and *Star Wars*…









Above: Old Playsets can't actually be played in *3.0*, although placing them on the base will still unlock plenty of new themed building blocks for Toy Box mode.

NEEDS A FEW MORE PAGES IN THE PLAYBOOK

Blood Bowl 2

FORMAT: PC
OTHER FORMATS: PS4, Xbox One
ORIGIN: France
PUBLISHER: Focus Home Interactive
DEVELOPER: Cyanide
PRICE: £34.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-2
MINIMUM SPEC: 2.5 GHz Dual Core CPU, 3GB RAM, 768MB GPU, 8GB HDD space
ONLINE REVIEWED: No

BETTER THAN
BLOOD BOWL





WORSE THAN
XCOM: ENEMY UNKNOWN

Though American Football and *Warhammer* might seem incongruous, the two are surprisingly complementary. The previous attempt was misguided in many ways but Cyanide has returned unperturbed and done a good job of improving on the original, bringing the game more in line with its potential.

The addition of a campaign mode helps introduce the admittedly complex mechanics more slowly by introducing new elements with each match. While more could be done to ease in complete newcomers, it makes the game easier to pick up and learn, and though it will always require some semblance of brainpower – this is a turn-based strategy game, after all – it doesn't simply throw you in the deep end. Visual flair has been improved incredibly, with highly detailed character models, animations and slow-motion cutscenes and a much better UI. Most frustrating is the reliance on dice rolls for every action, however, a necessary evil for such a game but one that can feel frustrating.

Below: Stock up on reroll cards. You'll be irritated to have your turn finished after a very simple action – like picking up a ball – fails and gives the opposing team a huge advantage. Part and parcel of this type of game, of course.



The roll successes are there to see at the bottom of the screen, but because you're never sure of the odds of success for all actions an unlucky turn can feel more unfair than it should – especially since a failed action results in a turnover and the remainder of your go is lost.

And as entertaining as the mini-cutscenes are, there just isn't enough variety in the animations. Yet despite having few animations, there's actually a reduction in different races from the previous game, a minor concern that still limits the experience all the same. *Blood Bowl 2* is an improvement over its predecessor, but falters just enough to stop it from becoming an integral strategy title.



VERDICT
A FINE COMBINATION OF SPORT AND STRATEGY

gamesTMmag scored 7 for
Blood Bowl 2
Follow our scores on JUST A SCORE

MORE COMMAND, LESS CONQUER

Act Of Aggression

FORMAT: PC
ORIGIN: France
PUBLISHER: Focus Home Interactive
DEVELOPER: Eugen Systems
PRICE: £34.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-8
MINIMUM SPEC: 2.5 GHz Dual-Core CPU, 2GB RAM, 512MB DirectX10 Compatible GPU, 15GB HDD Space
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

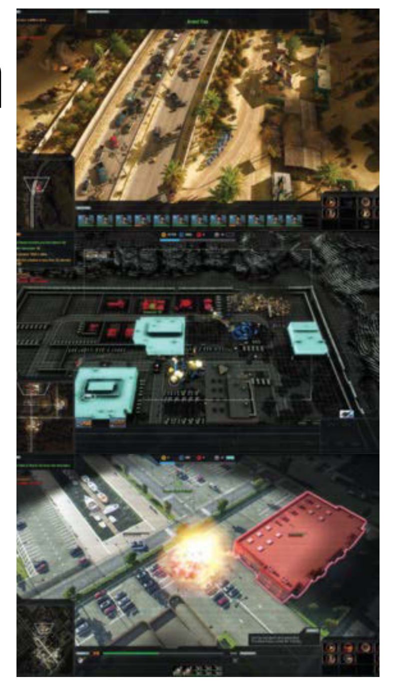
BETTER THAN
PLANETARY ANNIHILATION



WORSE THAN
COMPANY OF HEROES 2

With all the love long-dead genres have been getting these days (thanks Kickstarter) it's strange that RTS should still be struggling so much, and yet *Act Of Aggression* manages to perfectly encapsulate why they withered in the first place. Here's a game selling itself on the nostalgia-tinged romance of the "Golden Era of RTS", and it certainly feels like it. *Command & Conquer* is its most obvious touchstone with it weighing heavily on the 'fiction' side of sci-fi in terms of its units and structures, playstyle and over-the-top storyline, but there are flavours of more realistic strategy titles like *Sudden Strike* and *Company Of Heroes* in there too.

But it's a blend of styles that just doesn't work too well: the two very distinct types of RTS don't mesh, and it can make for a very trying system to learn. The large number of distinct units available would be fine, but the slower movement of attacks means you can't micro the game as well as you need to in order to react. The UI, too, is clunky and troublesome, with issues such as different structures being planted within sub-menus – adding an unnecessary extra barrier to the speedy, responsive gameplay necessary in an RTS.

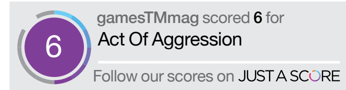


Above: In terms of visual quality and detail *Act Of Aggression* is up there among the very best, with a *huge* range of options to tailor your graphical settings to your hardware – an increasingly rare feature of PC games.

That said, the single-player certainly offers enough that you won't feel disappointed, though its difficulty is often a direct result of the problems already mentioned. It's a particularly bland affair, however, with a meandering, derivative and convoluted story riddled with confusing codenames and lacking any real personalities to attach them too. Multiplayer is admittedly much more compelling, but when it comes to RTS games that's like saying 'you're going to need a mouse'.

There's no denying that there's a lot of negativity here, and genuinely it's not as much of a disaster as it may seem; there's a solid – albeit flawed – RTS here that will appeal to long-term fans. *Act Of Aggression* is a sober reminder that if the genre can't innovate, then it's destined to remain ignored by all but the enthusiasts.

VERDICT
UNREMARKABLE IF NOT FOR HOW AWKWARD IT IS TO PLAY



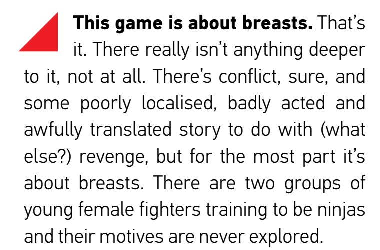
gamesTMmag scored 6 for
Act Of Aggression
Follow our scores on JUST A SCORE

AN ALMIGHTY BUST

Senran Kagura 2: Deep Crimson

FORMAT: 3DS
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Marvelous Entertainment
DEVELOPER: Tamsoft
PRICE: £29.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A





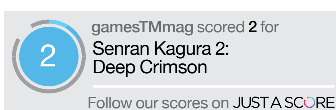
This game is about breasts. That's it. There really isn't anything deeper to it, not at all. There's conflict, sure, and some poorly localised, badly acted and awfully translated story to do with (what else?) revenge, but for the most part it's about breasts. There are two groups of young female fighters training to be ninjas and their motives are never explored.

The little active gameplay there is takes place in a 2.5D plane, and involves *Dynasty Warriors*-style moves: light, heavy and special attacks. Each level is executed in the same drab way: wave after wave of generic enemies lead up to a boss that's no more challenging than anything you've seen before. A large proportion of enemies, too, are underage girls with cartoon weapons and cartoon boobs. They're either wearing stockings and skirts or some kind of weird body sleeve that leaves nothing to the imagination… and the more damage you wail on enemies or suffer yourself, the more of your clothes are removed.

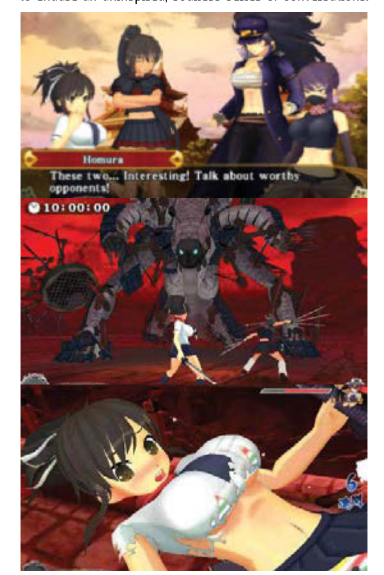
When you're not playing the derivative combat sections, you're free to explore the hub-house and check in on your unwieldy cast of characters. The only real mechanic here is (of course!) being able to dress the girls up in outfits you've unlocked. The game is so light on mechanics and fun anyway, the perversion it centres on just feels like a lazy gimmick to cash in on. The fetishised, young girl outfits on barely legal characters smacks of disrespect and awkwardness in the West: maybe the game works in Japan, but there are some things that shouldn't be ported.

VERDICT

A CLUMSY EXCUSE FOR LEWD VISUALS AND BAD ACTION



Below: The few occasions you aren't fighting, you have to endure an uninspired, soulless series of conversations.



A GAME OF DAMP, WARM HUGS

Dropsy

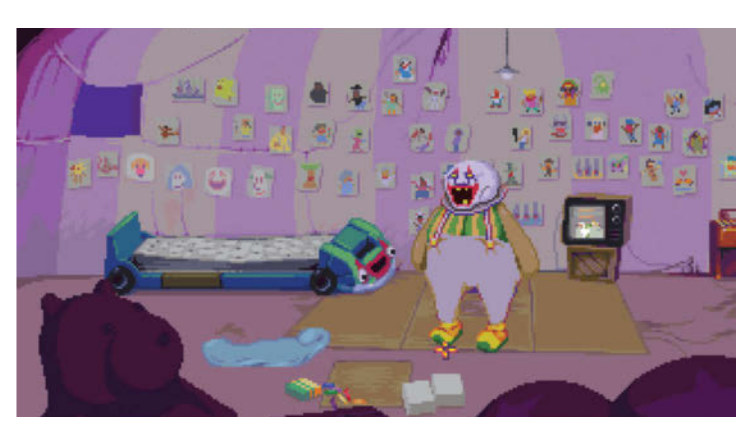
FORMAT: PC
OTHER FORMATS: iOS
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: Devolver Digital
DEVELOPER: Tendershoot, A Jolly Corpse
PRICE: £7.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A



Most adventure games are concerned with you saving the world, and for better or worse, this sense of grandiose purpose can alienate you. It's boring, too, right? *Dropsy* subverts that trope somewhat – you're introduced to the physically repulsive clown as he visits his mother's grave. She passed in a fire that's largely perceived to be his fault, and as soon as you see the 16-bit pixel graphics showing Dropsy looking genuinely sad, you know this game is going to be a bit different to all those other adventure games out there.

Dropsy isn't concerned with saving the world: his purpose (and his game) is much more humble – this despicable, disfigured clown just wants to give you a hug. He wants to help people feel better, prove them wrong about how they feel about him – this means doing tasks, large and small, for the messed-up population of his home town. These tasks are presented in a totally non-verbal manner – meaning you've got to interpret what people want, and the game therefore lies in trying to communicate via a clown that can't talk.

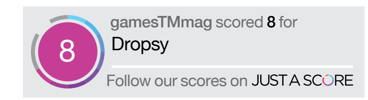
It's actually a really smart and genuinely sweet study of inhibited social skills – perhaps through the lens of Asperger's or autism – presented in a way that's at once unique and disorientating. The pixel art graphics and amazingly apt soundtrack help smooth over the lulls in the gameplay (and there *are* a few of these thanks to a day/night cycle that's a bit too clumsy for our liking), but largely the games keeps you involved at a good pace, and is a genuinely feel-good example of what adventure games could be if only they'd think outside the box a little more.



Above: Progress is marked in Dropsy's room in the form of portraits – everyone you hug/make happy gets their own crayon drawing. Awwww.

VERDICT

SWEET, FUN, INTERESTING. ESSENTIAL POINT-AND-CLICK





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WHY I ♥...

THE LAST OF US

CHRIS KESLER, FOUNDER AND DIRECTOR, LILITH LTD

“There are only two games I’ve ever played twice – it’s something I don’t do because usually I just don’t care enough [laughs]. But these two are: The Last Of Us *and* Silent Hill 2*. Both of these influenced me profoundly –* Silent Hill 2 *I played when I was still a teenager, and I was just amazed by how deep the story was and how much it made me feel… I just wanted to continue on through it and find out what happens to the characters and everything in the story…*

15 years later, The Last Of Us *came around and it made me care for all of the characters completely, and the way [Naughty Dog] told the story… it was sublime. These two games really left a lasting impression on me – you know, even now, I’ll walk around and I’ll whistle* The Last Of Us *theme right? It just stuck with me so much!”*



"The Last Of Us came around and it made me care for all of the characters completely"

CHRIS KESLER, FOUNDER AND DIRECTOR, LILITH LTD

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THE RETRO GUIDE TO…

ZX SPECTRUM

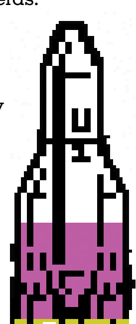
We take a look at the many classic games that helped shape one of the UK's most popular home micros. How many of the following classics did you play?

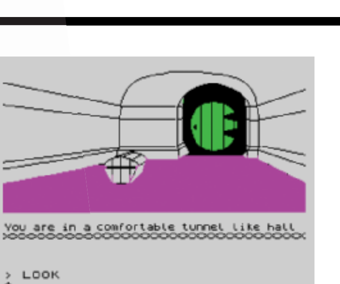
FOR MANY, THE birth of home gaming started with the ZX Spectrum. While the ZX80 and ZX81 came first, the affordability of Sir Clive's successor meant that even more people were able to access it. Many coders who have gone on to big success in the industry all started off coding for the ZX Spectrum. David Perry, the Stamper Brothers, the Oliver twins and many more cut their teeth on the machine and their games and companies have subsequently helped to create the industry.

The Spectrum was originally released in 1982 and became instantly famous due to its rubber keyboard. Later models corrected this, but there was something endearing about the home micro that helped turn it into one of the defining computers of its era. While it might not have been a powerhouse machine, there were plenty of developers who were able to coax great things from it, and as a result it is privy to a staggering number of original games, as well as amazing arcade conversions.

While designed with business in mind, the boom of the games industry and its relatively cheap price made it highly desirable and it was soon boasting plenty of titles, from adventure games to stunning space operas.

It's never easy putting together a list of classic games, particularly when the platform is as diverse as the Spectrum's, but the following titles are prime examples of those that defined Sir Clive Sinclair's classic micro.







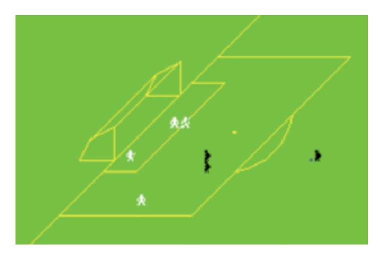
THE HOBBIT 1982

MELBOURNE HOUSE

This is the only text adventure we'll be covering, but it's an incredibly important one. *The Hobbit* is not only one of the first truly impressive graphic adventures to appear on the 8-bit micro, but it's also the first to perfectly capture the atmosphere of Middle-earth, thanks to accurate descriptions, delightful visuals and a host of recognisable NPCs.

FOOTBALL MANAGER 1982

Football Manager was originally released for the ZX81, but found more success on the Spectrum. Kevin Toms, already a computer programmer, originally envisioned his game as a board game, but struggled to represent the monthly listings. He soon realised that home micros were perfect for his vision and created his masterpiece. While the Spectrum version featured crude stick figures for the highlights, it's the gameplay that makes *Football Manager* so memorable and led to two sequels.

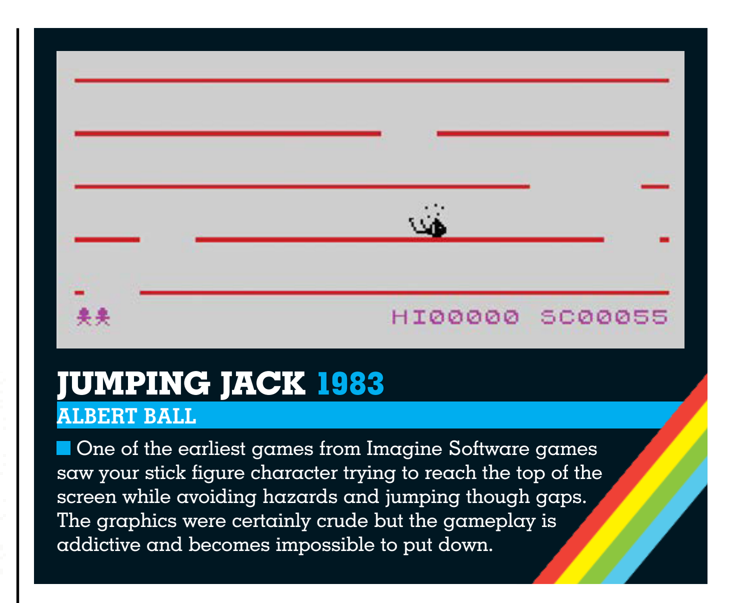


P = picked to play, i = injured

	NAME	NO.	SKILL	ENERGY	VALUE	
D	P.Parkes	1	3	16	£15000	P
D	D.Watson	2	3	13	£15000	P
D	P.Neal	3	5	14	£25000	P
D	A.Martin	4	1	16	£5000	P
D	K.Sansom	5	1	7	£5000	P
D	R.Osman	7	5	12	£25000	P
M	G.Rix	11	3	13	£15000	P
M	B.Talbot	15	3	8	£15000	
M	S.McCall	16	4	8	£20000	P
A	C.Regis	17	2	9	£10000	P
A	T.Morley	19	2	10	£10000	P
A	K.Keegan	23	1	16	£5000	P

PLAYERS PICKED=11

TYPE NO. OF PLAYER TO BE SOLD
OR type 99 to continue



JUMPING JACK 1983

ALBERT BALL

One of the earliest games from Imagine Software games saw your stick figure character trying to reach the top of the screen while avoiding hazards and jumping though gaps. The graphics were certainly crude but the gameplay is addictive and becomes impossible to put down.

ANT ATTACK 1983

This stunning isometric game was not only one of the first examples of the graphic style on a home system, but also let you play as a boy or girl. The aim is to enter the city of Antescher to retrieve your partner from a horde of dangerous ants. Upon leading your partner to safety, play continues with your loved one placed even deeper into the dangerous city.



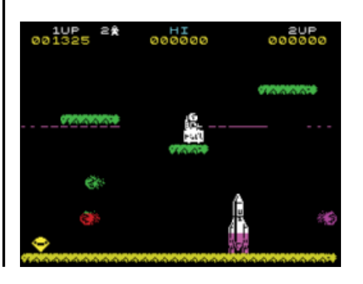


MANIC MINER 1983

Many regard Matthew Smith's classic to be one of the Spectrum's best platformers. Its pedigree is well earned thanks to its utterly bizarre visuals, pixel perfect jumping and fiendishly designed levels.

JETPAC 1983

Jetpac was one of the earliest Spectrum games to truly capture the excitement of the arcades and a stunning calling card for Ultimate. It's a beautifully crafted game with impossibly polished visuals and tight, responsive controls. While assembling a rocket and filling it with fuel to proceed to the next stage sounds simple in practice, the endless waves of enemies you must overcome make it a tricky task to fulfil.





ROGER KEANE INTERVIEW

The editor of Crash looks back

~~Why choose the Spectrum for your first magazine?~~

By the close of 1983 it was clearly the winner in the games stakes compared to all the other 8-bit computers – and at the time the C64 had barely launched in the UK. We were familiar with the markets and had editorial for at least the first issue of what became *Crash* magazine.

~~Why did you use youngsters to review games?~~

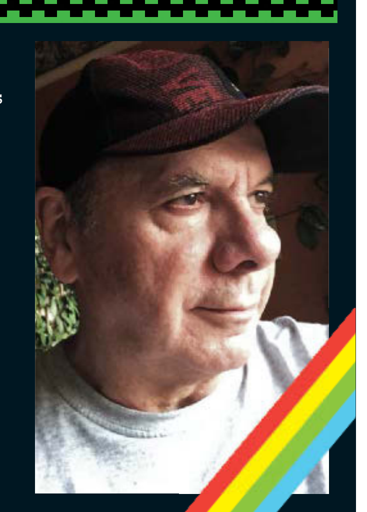
It occurred to me that these lads were the target market, so why shouldn't they provide hands-on criticism? Not being professional journalists, as the other mags used, the boys had no axe to grind other than to put across how good or bad a game was.

~~What challenges did you face in the early days?~~

The severest challenge faced in the early days was financing the cost of production and print in a news business that didn't pay for the first issue until sometime after we'd printed the fourth. Fortunately, the first two issues did so well that when our initial distributor went belly up, Britain's biggest distributor, COMAG, stepped in, advanced us the funds and transformed sales into something spectacular.

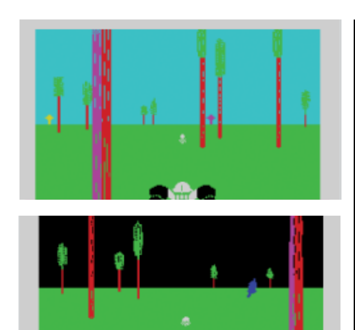
~~Why do you think *Crash* is so fondly remembered?~~

I am always proud of how many teenaged would-be journos grew up in the Newsfield Academy or under the aegis of the magazine and went on to be many things: writers, coders, and company founders in the games business.



3D DEATHCHASE 1983

■ Riding a high-speed motorcycle, you must race through a dense forest, shooting down enemy motorcyclists in order to retrieve their bullion. Estcourt's game not only switches between day and night levels, but boasts a progressively crowded forest that really puts your reflexes to the test. It's not only an incredible arcade-like experience, but is also one of the Spectrum's best games.



SABRE WULF 1984

■ This charming adventure from Ultimate sees Sabreman descend into a dangerous jungle to retrieve four missing pieces of a fabled amulet. The maze-like jungle is packed with hazards, but boasts power-ups in the form of useful orchids that can boost your speed or even make you invulnerable. Like *Jetpac* it was recently rereleased on *Rare Replay*.





TRASHMAN 1984

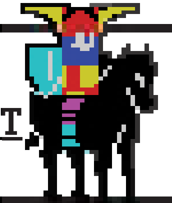
■ Evans made the mundane feel magical when he came up with the concept of his 1984 classic, *Trashman*. Your errant binman must dodge traffic, keep off the grass, perform tasks for customers and generally clear the bins as quickly as possible. It might not be the easiest of games made for the Spectrum, but the interesting premise and quirky concept make it hard to put down.

THE LORDS OF MIDNIGHT 1984

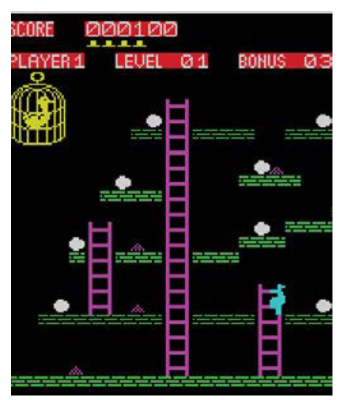
■ This epic genre-crossing adventure from Mike Singleton was heavily inspired by the works of J R R Tolkien and sees a group of heroes trying to defeat the evil Doomdark. Interestingly *The Lords Of Midnight* can be played in three ways: as an adventure game, a war game, or a brutally tough combination of the two.



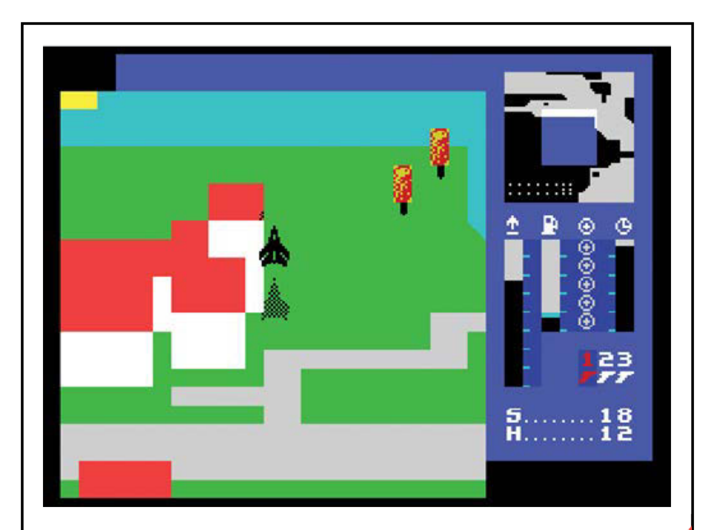
> "NOW THE CAGED DUCK HOUNDS YOU THROUGHOUT YOUR ADVENTURE"



CHUCKIE EGG 1984



■ Nigel Alderton's early Spectrum game is another excellent platformer for the humble micro. Inspired by the arcade games he used to play as a youngster, it's an amazingly slick platformer that has Hen House Harry running around cleverly designed stages retrieving eggs and bird seed. Once all eight stages have been completed, the game loops, but now the caged duck hounds you throughout your adventure. A sequel followed, but had nothing to do with Alderton.



T.L.L. 1984

COSTA PANAYI

This interesting take on the shoot-'em-up genre has you traversing a stunningly detailed landscape on the hunt for installations to take down. You must not only perform this task in a tight limit, but must also keep an eye on your fuel level, creating a neat risk vs reward mechanic.

KNIGHT LORE 1984

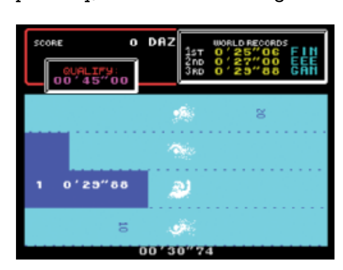
Created using a technique dubbed "Filmation", Ultimate created a template for isometric games that all future developers would mimic. Sabreman has now been cursed and turns into a werewolf each evening. To break his malady he must solve a number of single-room puzzles and retrieve various items so he can brew a potion that will reverse his misfortune.

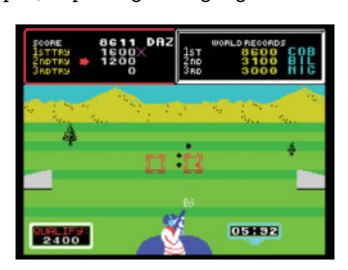




HYPER SPORTS 1985

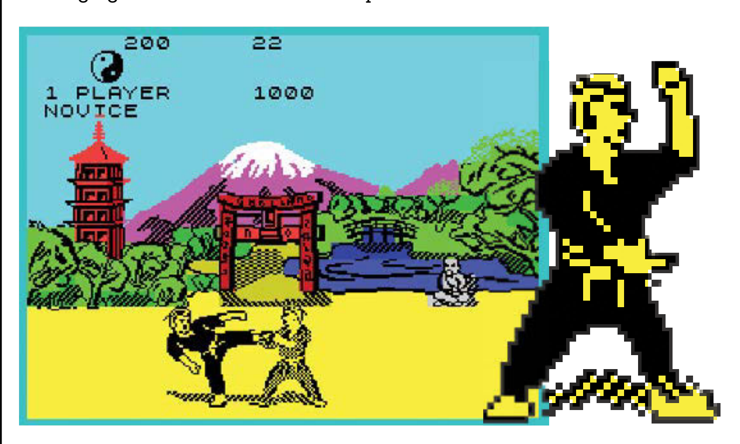
In addition to numerous original ideas, Imagine Software quickly built a reputation for its impressive arcade conversions. Many of these were by the late Jonathan Smith and *Hyper Sports* is easily one of his best examples. It's an excellent take on Konami's arcade classic, replicating both the unique control system and its superb cartoon like visuals. While it doesn't include the pole vault, the remaining six events are recreated perfectly, with Skeet Shooting and Triple Jump being the highlights.





THE WAY OF THE EXPLODING FIST 1985

Although it started life on the C64, this remains one of the Spectrum's best fighters. It uses the same scoring system found in standard karate, and sees players trying to score points by landing well-executed blows on their opponent. The one-button joystick setup offers an impressive array of 16 different moves while the challenging AI ensured Barnett's game was no pushover. Sadly, the fun bonus round where you must floor a charging bull didn't make it to the Spectrum.



CHAOS: THE BATTLE OF WIZARDS 1985

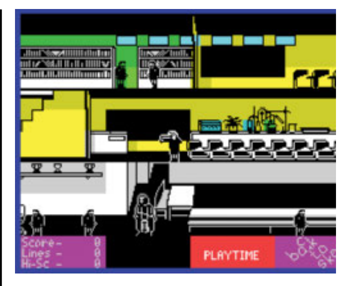


Like Kevin Toms, Julian Gollop had a love of board games that would spill into the digital world. *Chaos* is an excellent turn-based strategy game that sees rival wizards summoning monsters and spells in order to kill rivals. A sequel entitled *Chaos Reborn* is currently available on Steam early access.

SPELLBOUND 1985

Although this was a sequel to *Finders Keepers*, the gameplay was different, taking on the role of an adventure instead of a conventional platformer. It introduced a new window system called 'Windimation' that allowed Magic Knight to easily interact with the many interesting characters found in the game.





BACK TO SKOOL 1985

This stunning sequel was built on *Skool Daze* with a number of key differences. It adds a girls' school to explore; introduces caretaker Albert and adds new items like stink bombs, mice and water pistols. It otherwise plays similarly to its predecessor, giving you a sandbox world to play in as you try and get your forged report into the headmaster's safe.





STARQUAKE 1985

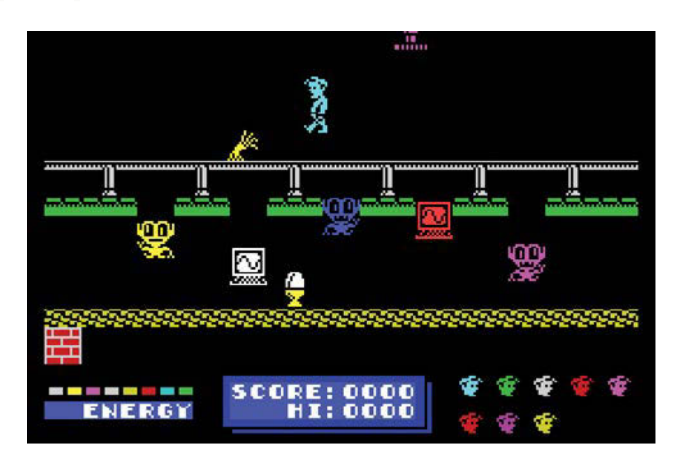
This adventure from Steve Crow is very reminiscent of Ultimate's games. It features similar gameplay, equally impressive visuals and some challenging gameplay. Controlling BLOB (Bio-Logically Operated Being) you must traverse the 512-screen planet using teleporters and hover platforms so you can repair its core and stop it imploding.

TAU CETI 1985



Elite may be every 8-bit gamer's go-to game for space exploration, but Pete Cooke's excellent *Tau Ceti* is just as valid if not as well known. Famed for its extensive use of 3D graphics, it creates a convincing game world that's a joy to explore. A sequel, *Academy*, appeared in 1986.

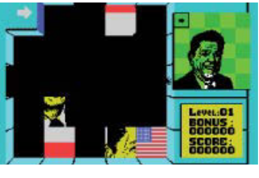
> "IT'S A FAR MORE AMBITIOUS GAME THAN THE LIKES OF JET SET WILLY"



DYNAMITE DAN 1985

This entertaining offering has its titular character trying to retrieve eight pieces of dynamite that have been randomly placed through the large playing area. Energy must be replaced by grabbing food, while falling from heights is also hazardous. It's a more ambitious game than the likes of *Jet Set Willy*, while the simple plot (Dan must use the dynamite to crack a safe) moves the action forward.

SPLIT PERSONALITIES 1986

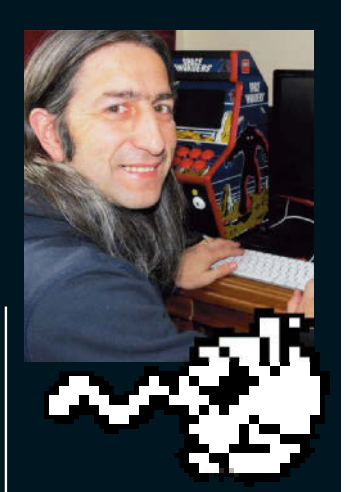




An interesting puzzler that's based around the classic sliding puzzle games of old. Players must assemble pictures of classic celebrities and politicians by pushing tile pieces around the screen. A number of power-ups are available, as are bombs, which must be disposed of before they can cause damage. It was originally known as *Splitting Images*, but was renamed for legal reasons.

THE SPECTRUM CODER

Jim Bagley revisits the Speccy



What was the Spectrum like to code on?

I enjoyed programming on the Spectrum because it was a challenge. Due to its simplistic nature to keep the costs down to make it affordable, it meant it had no extra hardware enhancements like sprites or hardware scrolling or even a sound chip initially, so you had to be creative in how to get the most out of your games. Also, the screen was laid out in a strange format, jumping about in a 6K chunk of memory per pixel line, which meant drawing software sprites on none character boundaries meant you had to handle jumping over the character boundary check every line in your sprite draw routine.

How did it compare to other 8-bit computers?

It caused a stir, because of its affordability and because the games had to rely on gameplay, as the audio couldn't compete with other 8-bit computers. It's funny when you think back to the school yard politics over which was best, because whoever had a C64 thought that was best, whoever had a Speccy thought that was best, and whoever had a CPC thought that was best, and the BBC users thought theirs was best. Whichever one you had was the best, because it let you have fun playing games on it creating your fun childhood memories.

What's the most impressive Spectrum game you played?

That's a tough one. If I had to pick one, it would probably be Joffa's *Green Beret*, due to the speed of it and smooth scrolling with colour.

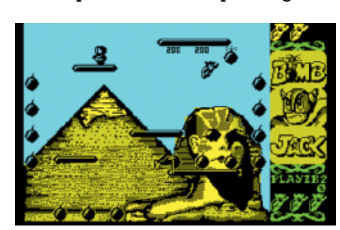
Which of your games is your best and why?

Midnight Resistance is my best Spectrum game. It's a game I enjoyed converting as well as playing. I wanted to have lots of colour in there and I wanted it to be as close to the arcade game as possible, which is why I also made sure I put the cutscenes in and huge sprites and lots of bullets on screen.

BOMB JACK 1986

Elite created many arcade conversions, but this adaptation of the Tecmo coin-op was easily its best. It's an extremely addictive game where you must fly around the screen collecting bombs, with special bonus points being earned if you defuse them in order. While there are only a few graphical backdrops, the bomb layouts continually change.







JACK THE NIPPER 1986

Take control of a naughty nipper and try and cause as much carnage as possible. Scaring cats, poisoning flowers and breaking crockery are just a few of the shenanigans you can get up to, while the cartoon-like graphics and colourful locations make it feel like a comic book come to life. A sequel followed in 1987.

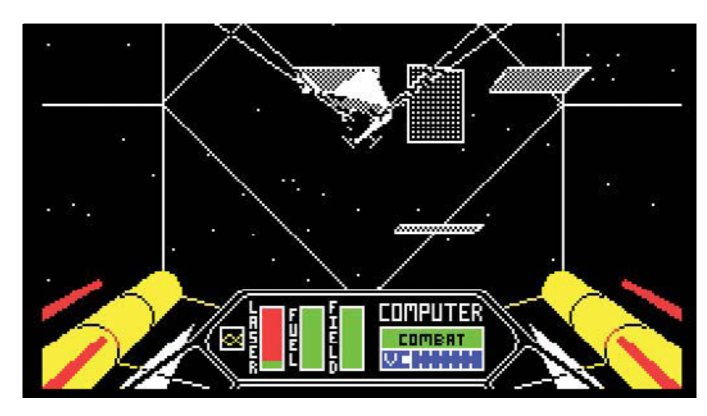
THE GREAT ESCAPE 1986

The Great Escape has you trying to escape from a dangerous prisoner of war camp. What's clever about Denton Designs' game, however, is how it makes you fit your daring escape around the everyday drudgery of prison life, meaning attending roll calls and mealtimes is just as important as finding your escape tools.



STARSTRIKE II 1986

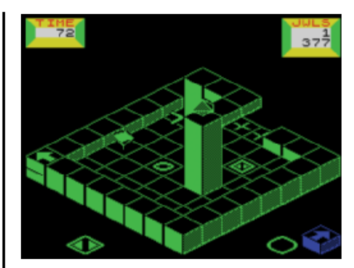
While the original *Starstrike* was a solid *Star Wars* clone, this sequel is miles better. The filled 3D graphics look incredible, while the action moves along at a brisk pace. While it's still a basic shooter at heart, making sure your gun doesn't overheat does add a bit of strategy to all the gung-ho blasting.



TURBO ESPRIT 1986

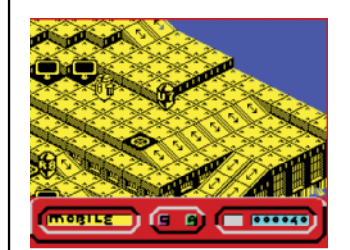
While Durell Software was responsible for a number of notable Spectrum games, this super offering is arguably its most ambitious title. While the gameplay is solid, it's the attention to detail, from working indicators to free-roaming pedestrians, that makes *Turbo Esprit* so immersive.





SPINDIZZY 1986

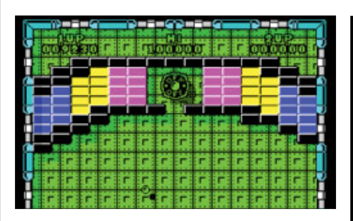
Impressive physics play a big part in Paul Shirley's excellent puzzle game. While it looks aesthetically similar to *Marble Madness*, it's a vastly different game, with the player navigating the landscape as quickly as possible in a transforming device against a tight time limit. It's infuriating at times, but ultimately it's superbly designed.





QUAZATRON 1986

This isometric adventure is the Spectrum's answer to *Paradroid* and sees your robot, Klepot, trying to destroy its peers. While it can be treated as a straightforward shooter, the ability to destroy robots and upgrade Klepto with numerous body parts adds a nice level of strategy.

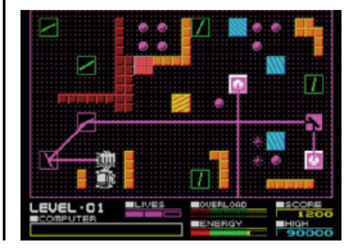


BATTY 1987

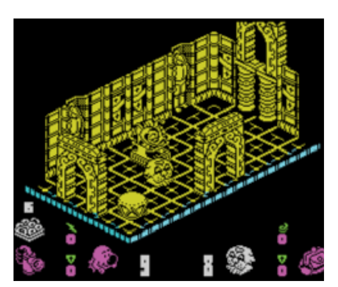
This excellent *Arkanoid* clone is rumoured to have been converted to the Spectrum by Ultimate's Mark Betteridge and was a freebie with *Your Sinclair*. In addition to clever wall layouts and smart visuals, it also boasts a cool co-operative two-player mode.

DEFLEKTOR 1987

This clever puzzle game has you guiding a laser beam to its terminal, by bouncing it over numerous mirrors and collecting all the available cells. It later received a sequel called *Mindbender* in 1989.



HEAD OVER HEELS 1987



Like the much later *Banjo-Kazooie*, the key mechanics of *Head Over Heels* are shared between two main characters. Initially you're just trying to reunite the pair, but once that happens, Ritman's surreal world truly opens up. Bernie Drummond's super sprite design channels Ritman's odd creations, while the levels are incredibly inventive with plenty of tricky puzzles to solve.

MATCH DAY II 1987

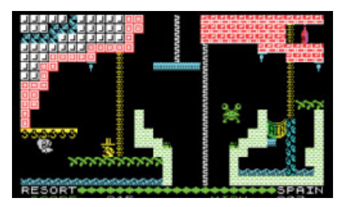
In the same year Jon Ritman reinvented isometric adventures, he also changed footy games on the Spectrum forever. *Match Day II* featured better visuals than its predecessor, faster-paced gameplay and far more control over your shots. It's the excellent two-player mode that makes it essential.



AUF WIEDERSEHEN MONTY 1987

Our favourite Monty Mole game, the fourth in the classic series, sees the popular character travelling around Europe so he can raise enough money to retire on the isle of Montos. Cleverly it's all laid out to mimic a map of Europe, although some of the humour has understandably dated.





TRANTOR: THE LAST STORMTROOPER 1987

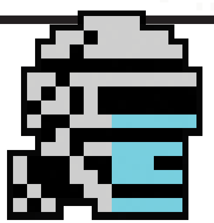
This relatively late Spectrum release showed just what Sir Clive's micro was capable of. It's a ridiculous run-and-gun with impressive visuals that works equally well as a standard shooter or a more nuanced adventure. It is hard in places due to unfair enemy placement, but the pace ensures it's never boring.





R-TYPE 1988

This is quite possibly one of the Spectrum's best arcade conversions. Bob Pape's done some cracking coding, delivering a shooter that's every bit as good as its arcade parent. The pace is fast, the graphics incredible, while the 128k version includes the level missing from the original 48k Spectrum release. One of the Spectrum's best shooters.



> "IT'S A RIDICULOUS RUN-AND-GUN WITH HIGHLY IMPRESSIVE VISUALS"

ROBOCOP 1988

Ocean Software was known for its movie licences, and this is easily the best one it released on the Spectrum. It boasts some truly entertaining mini-games that range from completing photofits to taking out knife-wielding assailants. Without a doubt, it's a highly entertaining blaster.



THE COLLECTOR

Dean Swain tells us about his Spectrum nostalgia

Why collect for the ZX Spectrum?
Although it wasn't the first system that I owned, the Spectrum is the system that I have the most nostalgia for. It was such a popular machine and there are thousands of games out there.

Is it expensive collecting for it?
Not really, but like any other system the rarer games fetch higher prices. I don't like paying more than what a game was priced when it was first released.

What's the most precious game in your collection and why?
The full-price version of *Renegade* by Imagine, not a rare game by any means but it was the first game that I got after the Christmas holidays of '87.

What's the most expensive game you purchased and why?
Not strictly a game, but the most expensive software I bought was the full-price version of *3D Construction* kit, which came in a box with a VHS tape. I had lent this to a friend who sat on the box. It wasn't cheap the first time around, so that was costly. Especially as I only really needed the box.

What advice would you give to fellow collectors?
Never give up looking; bargains can still be found. Check out the music section of charity shops, as games on tape often end up lost among old CDs.



TARGET RENEGADE 1988

■ This standalone sequel to *Renegade* is the Spectrum's best scrolling fighter. The five levels are full of variety, there's a decent amount of special moves and weapons, while the graphics are bright and cartoony. The highlight however is the utterly brilliant two-player mode that ensures it's always entertaining to play.

LASER SQUAD 1988

■ Although Julian already found success on the Spectrum with *Chaos* and *Rebelstar*, *Laser Squad* is arguably his most ambitious 8-bit game. It lays down much of the groundwork that would appear in the *X-COM* series and has a number of mechanics, from heavier units suffering from tiredness to panicking characters.





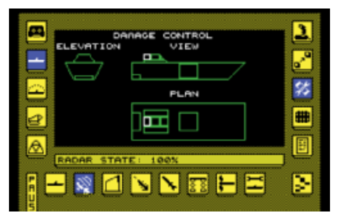


CYBERNOID 1988

■ This interesting effort from Raffaele Cecco straddles both the platform and shoot-em-up genres. While it's an all-out shooter at its core, the design of many of the screens requires a fair amount of navigation that features some deliberate pixel perfect joystick control. A sequel arrived in 1989, but is a little too close to Cecco's original.

CARRIER COMMAND 1989

■ Astonishing is the best way to sum up *Carrier Command*. Although it was designed for 16-bit computers, it was nonetheless crammed in the Spectrum 128k. The innovative icon system gives you a surprising amount of control, while the sandbox nature ensures there's always something to do.

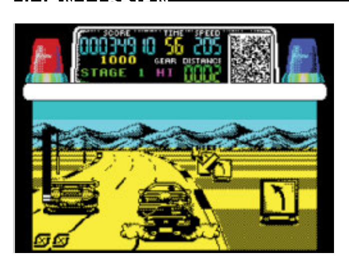


FANTASY WORLD DIZZY 1989



■ Dizzy's third adventure was a brilliant caper, dispensing with the brutal difficulty of *Treasure Island Dizzy* and expanding the adventure-based gameplay. Additionally it also greatly refines the inventory system and has a far better balanced selection of puzzles to solve. It's also notable for introducing the players to Dizzy's family, the lovable Yolkfolk.

CHASE H.Q. 1989



■ Most of the Spectrum's best conversions came later in its life and *Chase H.Q.* is no different. While it's a multi-load on 48k, it features all the key elements of the game and offers a convincing impression of speed. As a result, chasing after perps and ramming them off the road has never been so fun.

ROCK STAR ATE MY HAMSTER 1989

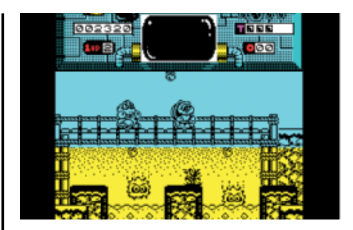
■ This controversial management game has you trying to master the music industry to win four gold disks in the space of a year. It features hilarious caricatures of many famous rock stars, including Elton John and Madonna, and marries it to surreal newspaper headlines and absorbing gameplay.



SIM CITY 1990

■ Frankly, we're astonished by *Sim City* on the Spectrum. While credit must be given to Simon Butler's dinky sprite designs, it's the way that the game has been crammed into the aging 8-bit computer that really impresses. While some of the cool catastrophes are missing, all the intricate and deep gameplay is included, making this an amazing time-sink.





TURBO THE TORTOISE 1992

■ This is one of the most impressive platformers you're ever likely to play on the Spectrum. It has great cartoon visuals, insanely smooth scrolling and it runs at a fast pace. It's not massively well known as it came out in the system's twilight years, but it's certainly worth tracking down if you're a fan of the genre.

10 MORE TO CONSIDER...

- HORACE GOES SKIING (1982) WILLIAM TANG
- STOP THE EXPRESS (1983) HUDSON
- ATIC ATAC (1983) ULTIMATE PLAY THE GAME
- TIR NA NOG (1984) GREG FOLLIS, ROY CARTER
- JET SET WILLY (1984) MATTHEW SMITH
- FAIRLIGHT (1985) BO JANGEBORG
- THANTOS (1986) MIKE A. RICHARDSON
- THE SACRED ARMOUR OF ANTIRIAD (1986) CHRIS STANGROOM
- FEUD (1987) THE PICKFORD BROTHERS
- REX (1988) JAS AUSTIN



BEHIND THE SCENES

EXCITEBIKE 64

The Nintendo 64 saw many of the Japanese giant's classic games revisited, and Excitebike was no exception. Released towards the end of the its commercial life, it proved there was still a lot of fun to be had with the popular console. **games™** talked to some of the team behind Excitebike 64



EXCITEBIKE 64

Released: 2000
Format: Nintendo 64
Publisher: Nintendo
Developer: Left Field Productions
Key Staff: Mike Lamb (coding and production), James Maxwell, Allen Fernandez (production), Sam Baker, Ben Stragnell (coding), Henry Sterchi (Nintendo producer), Jonathan Evans, Allan Hayburn, Richie Romero, George Simmons (art), Matt Furniss, Chris Lamb (music and sound effects).

BY 2000, THE NINTENDO 64 LOOKED LIKE A CONSOLE FROM A DIFFERENT ERA. The PlayStation had debuted five years earlier, and Sega had released the Dreamcast just a year earlier. The European and American release of the PlayStation 2 was just around the corner, and all these systems embraced the new CD storage medium in contrast to Nintendo's steadfast belief in the longevity of the cartridge. Yet the Nintendo 64 was far from short of classic games, many of them updates of famous Nintendo IP such as *Zelda* and *Mario*. The original *Excitebike*, first released on the Famicom in 1984, was a popular title, yet one that strangely failed to make an appearance on its follow-up, the Super Famicom (SNES). By the end of the century, it didn't look like it was going to make it onto the Nintendo 64 either.

Left Field Productions had been co-started by British veteran coder Mike Lamb in 1994. Having had a successful career in the UK for Ocean Software, Lamb moved to American in 1991. "I'd always wanted to go to America after having seen *The Rockford Files* as a kid," he explains with a grin. "Then, when Malibu games advertised for a coder, I applied, and got the job." Once installed at the West Coast developer, Lamb found himself involved its boxing games, specifically *Evander Holyfield Boxing*. The success of that game persuaded Lamb to take a liking to the sport, and a realisation that if he wanted the freedom to work on the projects he really wanted to, he needed to start his own company. Another deciding factor was money. "I'd met Jim Simmons, who wrote the original John Madden game for EA Sports. I'd done quite nicely out of my boxing game royalties, but Jim was making a lot more by working for himself, and his games were franchises, where instead of starting from scratch, he just tweaked the AI and graphics every year."

After talking to his artist, Jeff Godfrey, Lamb decided to leave Malibu, start his own company, and work on securing a major licence from Sega Sports. "Unfortunately they [Sega Sports] weren't keen on entrusting a big licence sports game to a start-up," says Lamb, "so we ended up working on *Slam 'n' Jam Basketball* for Crystal Dynamics." To reflect its sporting origins, Lamb named the new company Left Field Productions and began hiring, including fellow Brit and 3D programmer Ben Stragnell.

"We'd just shipped *NBA Courtside* for Nintendo," begins Stragnell, "and were in discussions regarding what our next title should be. We pitched a few ideas, all of which were at least somehow sports-themed as that had been our speciality to date." One of the ideas that was floated about was a motocross game, thanks to some of Left Field's producers being particularly into the sport. "That idea won out and I was very happy because it was a nice departure from the team-based sports titles that Left Field had focused on to date."

EXCITEBIKE 64 STARTED OUT AS A MORE TRADITIONAL MOTOCROSS GAME

While the team were busy prototyping ideas and working out the game mechanics, the idea of making a true sequel to the NES game arose. Nintendo's producer, Henry Sterchi, takes up the story. "*Excitebike 64* started out as a more traditional motocross game to prove out the core engine, handling and basic play. The handling was physics-driven and realistic, but I wouldn't have called it a technical simulation. We did try some real-time track deformation such as tyre ruts, but it was abandoned because it wasn't that fun and quite a technical drain."

When Sterchi judged the time was right, the game was presented to Nintendo and a true sequel to *Excitebike* proposed. "We'd already discussed and prototyped the thing we wanted around the turbo mechanic and track designs in order for it to be an authentic *Excitebike* experience," continues Sterchi, "so it was always the hope that they'd go for it and if it didn't work out, it was ready to stand on its own as a more traditional motocross racer."


Mike Lamb

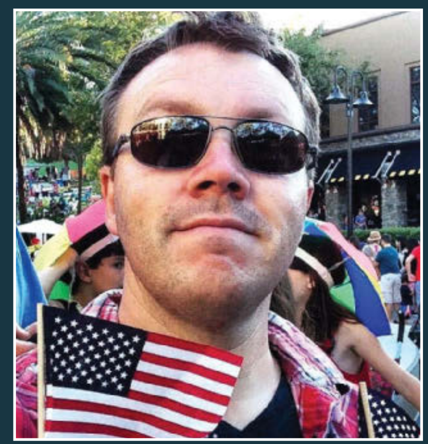


Ben Stragnell


Henry Sterchi

SOUNDING OUT EXCITEBIKE 64

We talked to the awesome Matt Furniss about his sound design role



"*EXCITEBIKE 64* WAS my first Nintendo 64 game," says Furniss. "Although I only actually did two, this and *Cruisin' Exotica*." Furniss took over from Mike Lamb's brother Chris, who left the project early on to pursue his career elsewhere. "I'd already worked on a lot of PlayStation extreme-sports games for 989 Studios," continues Furniss, "So I was probably a good fit for the project. The music is basically a collection of two-channel audio stems, and we recorded the voice-over stuff at my studio in Burbank."

This commentary was by Left Field producer James Higgins, while Furniss contributed the announcement in the game's intro. He almost wasn't required, as Left Field initially planned to licence existing music and develop compression tech to squeeze the tunes in the cartridge. The idea was abandoned due to time constraints. "I'm obviously glad they didn't use licenced music. That would have been very un-Nintendo. I was thrilled to be working on a N64 version of Miyamoto's original. That's why I remade the finish race tune – a tip of the hat to the original."





Thrilling jumps were de rigeur for every track.

Fittingly, while Stragnell and Lamb both missed the original *Excitebike* first time around, Henry Sterchi was a big fan of the game. "I lived in New York at the time of the NES release, which was one of the first test markets," he recalls. "I got the little brochure with my NES and must have looked at that single screenshot of *Excitebike* nearly every day until I could save up enough money to get it." Despite loving the game, Sterchi was to be disappointed by the non-working track editor of the US version. "It was a feature of the Famicom disc version that got pulled; but actually it looked like it worked but just hung there. But overall, *Excitebike* was one of the inspirations that started me on my journey of wanting to make video games myself." Having worked with Left Field on its two *NBA Courtside* games, Sterchi also shared the love of motocross. "We had a bunch of enthusiasts at Left Field and they all gave us feedback," recalls Mike Lamb, "I had a bike myself from the age of 16 to 25, but they tend to work better on flat ground for me!"

With Nintendo already a stake-holder in Left Field, fully-fledged development of *Excitebike 64* began, and thoughts turned to how to make the game faithful to the original in some ways, yet entirely new and fresh in others. "The key to the original game was controlling the bike in the air to stick the landings and I think we captured that pretty well," explains Lamb. "I don't think a truly faithful update would have really been enough on a 64-bit machine and fortunately Nintendo understood this and were on board with making a more simulation-based motocross racing game."

Lamb himself coded all the physics and gameplay. "I was a big fan of how games like *Wave Race* and *F-Zero* gave you different vehicles that were roughly equal but different," he continues, "So we sort of followed that model. You had acceleration, top speed handling and stability and the bikes were balanced with different trade-offs. So, for example, a heavy guy had good top speed, but poor acceleration." Stragnell, meanwhile, wrote the game's 3D engine, a tool chain for the artists and coded the biker animation, while Sam Baker created the game's menus and, inspired by the original game, a track editor.

Baker recalls the organic nature of *Excitebike 64*'s development, "We knew from the outset we wanted to make a kick-ass and great-looking racing game that captured all the speed and big air of motocross – and that we wanted to support indoor arenas and a variety of outdoor tracks. But the most important thing was that the bikes handled well, and that was down to Mike [Lamb] and his physics-based model for the bikes. Beyond that, a lot of the development *was* organic. We had the freedom to try out lots of stuff, and if it was fun, it made it into the game. Hill climb, Excite3D, soccer and desert modes are all examples of that – none of them were in the original design."

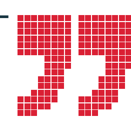
As the creator of the game's 3D engine, Stragnell's main issue was maintaining the game's frame-rate. "I imposed some fairly draconian restrictions on the artists in terms of how the tracks were built," he says, "And it was in order to keep things running quickly.



WHAT THEY SAID…

The California-based software house has not only perfectly recaptured the spirit of the classic for this jaw-dropping N64 adaptation, but upraised a fantastic 3D engine around it, and doused everything with buckets of wonderful new extras too

IGN, May 2000



To their credit, the whole art team were able to deliver some amazing work given those limitations."

Despite being nominally producer on the game and Nintendo's conduit to the development team, Henry Sterchi found himself more and more involved with *Excitebike 64*'s progress. "They were great about sending over very frequent builds and providing tools to tweak things or make adjustments remotely," he remembers. "They were a fantastic partner and I helped wherever I could, even in track design and feedback." Sterchi's reward was a generous inclusion in the design credits of the game. But unlike Left Field's previous game for Nintendo, Kobe Bryant's *NBA Courtside*, *Excitebike 64* carried no official motocross licence or official endorsement from a professional rider.

"There were very few riders that were household names," says Sterchi, "So it wouldn't have been a single face, but a suite of riders, which would have been very complicated to licence. Had we stayed more on the pro-mode route and not been able to do *Excitebike*, it may have changed, but we felt the gameplay and style should be front and centre. With that, I'm quite proud of the fictional riders we made and it was important to us to include female riders as well, which might not have been possible had we gone 'real'". Nintendo offered no restrictions and, having received approval, the team explained its goals and what they meant to the gameplay. Aside from regular check-ins and specialist reviews, Sterchi was left free to assist Left Field in *Excitebike 64*'s development.

It's apparent the team wanted – and were given – free rein to add extra modes, and perceived added-value to their update of the NES classic, and indeed considered these bonuses imperative if the game was to succeed. But actually this was at odds with the opinion of Nintendo's Shigeru Miyamoto, as Henry Sterchi explains. "He [Miyamoto] gave some great feedback in that we went too wide with the extra modes and should have stayed focused on depth instead. At the end of the day, some of the modes were nice distractions, but he was, of course, right. They didn't improve the main game experience, which was the reason why people bought it." They did bring the added value with mini-games – such as the soccer track, complete with a giant bouncing football, and the infinitely looping desert track – proving popular with critics and fans alike.

Technically, as Stragnell touched upon, the main battle was not with memory, but frame-rate. "It's very important for racing games," says Mike Lamb, "and we were always trying to push the console to its limits." The result of this was a straight battle between speed, or rather a sense of speed, and keeping everything running smoothly. "We spent a lot of time trying to get the speed up," continues Lamb. "We had the bikes going at a simulated 90mph and there was a limit to how far you can push that before the game becomes too difficult to control. We messed around with the camera positioning, but never really cracked it. It was only when I was working on *MTX Mototrax* that I realised we should have widened the field of view, but this would have then had huge implications for the frame-rate, so maybe it was better as it was."

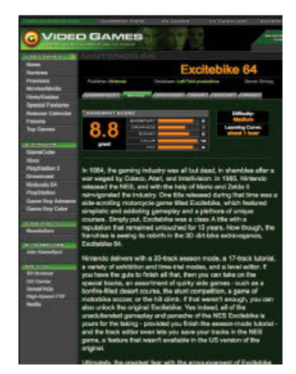
WE WERE ALWAYS TRYING TO PUSH THE CONSOLE TO ITS LIMITS

Excitebike 64 took just under two years to develop, longer than originally envisioned. "Getting the higher resolution feature to work took a bit longer due to the frame-rate taking a hit," explains Sterchi, "plus the split-screen and drone riders, that in hindsight may not have been worth the effort. The scope just kept getting bigger and bigger and the game deserved more time than we thought."

Nevertheless, there were still parts that the team felt could have been improved. "If I had to single out anything I think we should have spent more time getting the announcer to sound more fluid," says Stragnell, "and it would have also



WHAT THEY SAID...



VIDEO GAMES

Excitebike 64

8.8

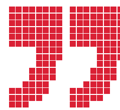
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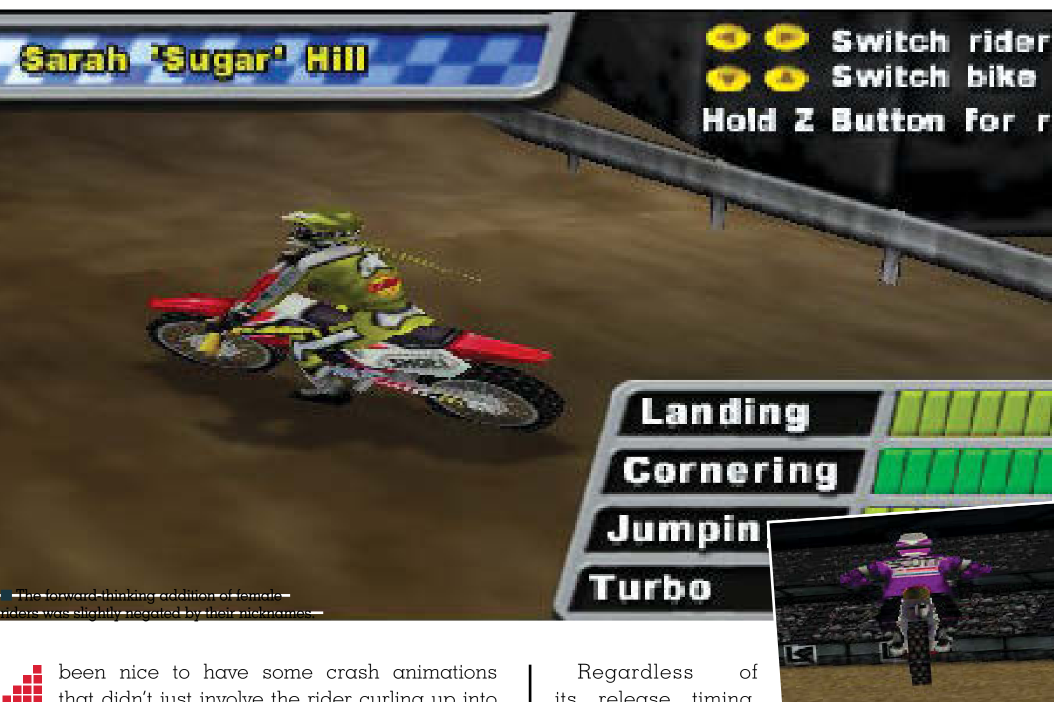
In 1984, the gaming industry was all but dead, in shambles after a war waged by Coleco, Atari, and Intellivision. In 1985, Nintendo released the NES, and with the help of Mario and Zelda it reinvigorated the industry. One title released during that time was a side-scrolling motorcycle game titled Excitebike, which featured simplistic and addicting gameplay and a plethora of unique courses. Simply put, Excitebike was a class A title with a reputation that remained untouched for 15 years. Now though, the franchise is seeing its rebirth in the 3D dirt-bike extravaganza, Excitebike 64.

Nintendo delivers with a 20-track season mode, a 17-track tutorial, a variety of exhibition and time-trial modes, and a level editor. If you have the guts to finish all that, then you can take on the special tracks, an assortment of quirky side games - such as a bonfire-filled desert course, the stunt competition, a game of motorbike soccer, or the hill climb. If that weren't enough, you can also unlock the original Excitebike. Yes indeed, all of the unadulterated gameplay and panache of the NES Excitebike is yours for the taking - provided you finish the season-mode tutorial - and the track editor even lets you save your tracks in the NES game, a feature that wasn't available in the US version of the original.

All told, *Excitebike 64* is an excellent rebirth of the franchise. The gameplay is arcade-like, but it is also deep and varied in that well-known Nintendo way. The visuals aren't perfect, but they are stunning nonetheless. Most importantly, the game is both fun and addicting, giving oldsters and youngsters alike a chance to revel in the glory that is Excitebike

Gamespot, May 2000





■ The forward-thinking addition of female riders was slightly negated by their nicknames.

■ The stunt arena is a good place to practise your skills.

been nice to have some crash animations that didn't just involve the rider curling up into a little ball!" Sterchi agrees on this last point. "We had a good amount of feedback from testing that the crashes should have been more fun, but we didn't really have the time to do any more with it, and we didn't do the old *Excitebike* button mash to run back to your bike, either. At the end of the day, I think the feedback was probably right, but I still don't think it was a high enough priority against the time it would have taken to do."

Excitebike 64 was ultimately released early summer of 2000 in its native North America. Nintendo Japan would also pick the title up, and it was released there a couple of months later. Finally, over a year after the US release, the game appeared in Europe. "I remember going back to the UK and talking to friends in the UK who said the game still wasn't out," recalls Mike Lamb. "Maybe because Nintendo weren't doing so well in Europe at the time it got delayed, but Nintendo Japan picked it up, so that made up for it." At the time, rumours abounded that Nintendo was struggling to keep up with demand in Europe for some of its popular games. "I'm not sure about that because they always kept things like that close to their chest," says Sterchi, "But I do remember we had some lengthy issues with getting the PAL versions up to par, which took time. And it could have been NOE wanting to hold the release for strategic reasons." Whatever the motive or cause of the delay, *Excitebike 64* was, in all territories, a late release on the console. Would it have done better had it been released earlier? "It's possible," muses Stragnell, "But the flip-side of that is that if we'd started development a year or two earlier, we wouldn't have had the opportunity to become as familiar with the hardware. I don't know that we would have been able to make as good a game."

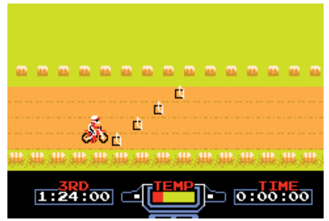
Regardless of its release timing, *Excitebike 64* saw effusive reviews upon release and achieved decent sales ("I think it was over 2 million units world-wide," reveals Lamb). Says Nintendo producer Sterchi, "From my recollection it did quite well and Nintendo thought it was a success. With something like the pedigree of *Excitebike*, expectations were very high, and a hit at Nintendo often meant sky-high

I KNOW MIYAMOTO WAS PASSIONATE ABOUT THE GAME DURING DEVELOPMENT

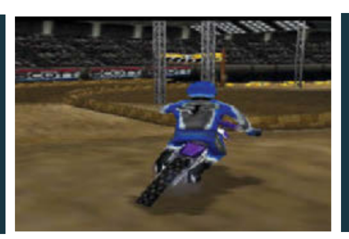
multimillions, so it wasn't a number one seller for them as I would have hoped. But it was well-received and moved some good numbers." As to the game itself, most of the team had a positive feeling it would turn out to be an excellent combination of serious motocross simulation and the fun gameplay that Nintendo was renowned for. "I had an inkling it was going to turn out well," smiles Stragnell, "But it can sometimes be hard to ascertain when you're in the thick of developing a game. I think Mike found a really great balance between realism and fun and the art team in particular found incredibly creative ways to work inside the restrictive toolset I gave them. The outdoor tracks in particular were really imaginative."

For Henry Sterchi, working on *Excitebike 64* even persuaded him to go for a change in career. "Doing some design work on this and *Shadows Of The Empire* became the catalyst for me making a career

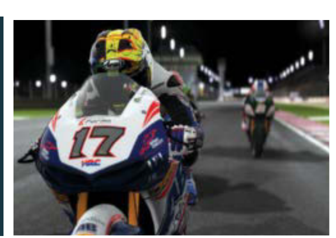
> A GAMING EVOLUTION Excitebike > Excitebike 64 > MXGP



The 2D *Excitebike* set the franchise going with its unique take on motocross. *Excitebike 64* made it 3D.



Released last year, *MXGP* featured real teams and riders in the official licence, marking the advance of the genre.



jump from production to design," he reveals. "I loved the nuts and bolts of making a game as a producer, but adding the fun, labouring over the tiniest details in atmosphere, controls and feel, making sure the experience was all it could be, that's what I fell in love with."

Left Field's team for *Excitebike 64* was small, even for the period, and close-knit. There were issues and late nights during development as there often are, but the experience was generally a positive one according to the team. "It's definitely one of the high points of my career," says Stragnell, who moved on to pastures new shortly after the US release of the game. "And we did keep teams pretty small at Left Field – Sam, Mike and myself were the only engineers on the project. Sometimes I do get a little nostalgic for those days!" For Mike Lamb himself, the game was a further endorsement that he had made the right decision in striking out for himself. "We had a good team. Henry was really good at coming up with concrete ideas that could improve the game. Ben was really good at implementing them and we were all on the same wavelength in terms of doing a simulation-based racing game – *Waverace* on a bike. Everyone worked hard, and it came out well. It was my favourite game we did at Left Field."

EXTRAS! EXTRAS!

Designer and coder Ben Stragnell on some of the added value Left Field put into Excitebike 64

"I THOUGHT IT might be fun to try and include the original game. It wasn't actually a port – I spent a couple of weekends writing enough of a NES emulator to run the original *Excitebike*. The game also had a track designer save/load feature that was designed for the Japanese Famicom Data Recorder. I was able to put some hooks into the code and enable actual save/loading tracks to the Nintendo 64 cart. I also came up with the idea of the desert track. I'd just seen *Motocross Madness* on the PC and was really impressed that you could see for miles, so thought it might be interesting to get a level-of-detail terrain engine on the N64. The terrain generation was easy enough – it's just some simple fractals. The hard part was stitching together the various levels of details without seams. I don't think I got it completely right. The track editor for *Excitebike 64* was something we wanted from day one. It was pretty much entirely written by Sam Baker, who did a great job with it."





■ The view distance could be changed to give a bigger picture.







INTERVIEW

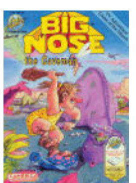
JASON FALCUS

Hailing from the North East of England during a time of great industrial strife, the Falcus brothers Jason and Darren helped forge a thriving development hub

SELECT GAMEOGRAPHY



SAS Combat Simulator (1989)
Programmer



Big Nose The Caveman (1991)
Programmer and designer



College Slam (1996)
Programmer

How were you introduced to gaming in the Eighties?
One of my earliest memories of gaming was from a family caravanning holiday around 1980. The campsite had a games room with a *Space Invaders* arcade game, and my brother and I got hooked on it. Shortly after we got back, our dad started bringing home a Commodore PET from his office on a weekend and it had a few games including *Space Invaders*. While my brother Darren and I were playing these games, we accidentally discovered that pressing the escape key exited the program, and revealed the BASIC source code and this fascinated us. After this, we pestered our parents for a computer, and we eventually got a ZX81 in 1981.

Is this when you made the jump from playing to coding?
We immediately began playing around with coding – the games were very expensive for young teenagers, so we starting learning to code. This involved getting objects moving on the screen, followed by getting something to move when keys were pressed. We were totally engrossed, and soon began making simple games that would fit in the ZX81's 1k RAM. We later got a 16k RAM pack and thermal printer.

Did you find BASIC an easy language to learn?
It was fairly easy to learn once we'd got our heads around the basic architecture of the computer and the screen display. It taught us all the principles of computer logic, which doesn't change that much between different languages.

A lot of magazines carried type-in listings. Did you learn from those too?
Yes, we pretty much learned by trying out different commands in the BASIC manual, which came with the computer, and by reading magazines such as *Personal Computer World* and *Sinclair User*.

OUR FIRST DEAL WAS TO MAKE GAMES FOR A MUSIC SHOP IN SUNDERLAND… THEY PAID US £40 PER WEEK

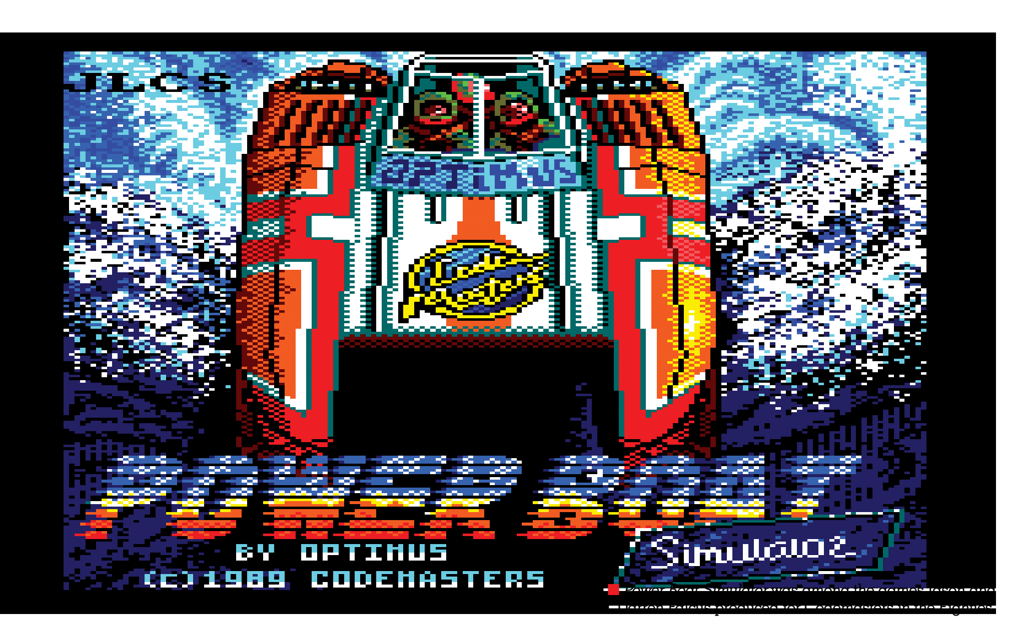
Your first published game was *Castle Of Doom* in 1983, wasn't it?
It was a graphic and text adventure based on the Dracula theme and it was published on the Dragon 32 computer. We got lucky finding



OH BROTHER

"There was a common trend in the UK of brothers who grew up as back-bedroom coders and went on to be successful in the games industry. I think a big factor of this is that it is easier to learn when two of you can bounce ideas off each other, especially before the internet. Computers were also relatively expensive, so parents were more likely to buy one as a shared Christmas present."

Jason on working with his brother Darren



Power Boat Simulator was among the games Jason and Darren Falcus produced for Codemasters in the Eighties

a publisher. We found out that a local publisher called Paramount Software had recently opened up in Stockton-on-Tees a few miles from where we lived. We went to see them, and they pretty much immediately signed *Castle Of Doom* up, along with our next game, *Sporting Decathlon*, an arcade sports game, which was dreamt up way before games like *Track And Field*, and contained some 6809 machine code. That was a big selling point for games back then.

How old were you and your brother?

We were 13 and 14 years old when these games were published and we definitely got a bit of kudos at school when the games were advertised as part of a double-page spread in popular computer magazines.

As you say, that game came out for the Dragon 32. What attracted you to this?

We got the Dragon 32 computer for Christmas in 1982. Even though the Sinclair Spectrum was more popular at the time, we loved the look of the Dragon, with its solid case, real keyboard and a whopping 32k of RAM. We soon got to grips with developing games for it, initially in BASIC, and later in assembly language.

You set up your first company, Optimus Software, in 1988 and developed games for Codemasters. Was it daunting?

I'd worked for a small local company as a business software programmer for a short spell while Darren worked as a computer-aided draftsman at our dad's engineering company. But we decided to give going into business a try and set up a games studio. I was 18 and Darren was 19 and it was a little bit daunting, but the risks were low initially. We had a small office, which our father built in the back of his garage and we lived with our parents so we had fairly low outgoings.

What was your first deal?

Our first deal was to make games for a music shop in Sunderland, which decided it wanted to get into games publishing. They paid us £40 per week to make some games for them, so we made two games on the Amstrad computer. But the company then decided to back out of games publishing and the games never got published. Within six months of setting up, though, we secured our first major deal with Codemasters to make four Spectrum and Amstrad games. It gave us a PC containing a cross-platform compiler as part of the deal, and this was a major step forward because it allowed us to easily develop for both Spectrum and Amstrad simultaneously. They both had Z80 processors, but the video displays were different.

Did you do everything from the coding to the music to the art?

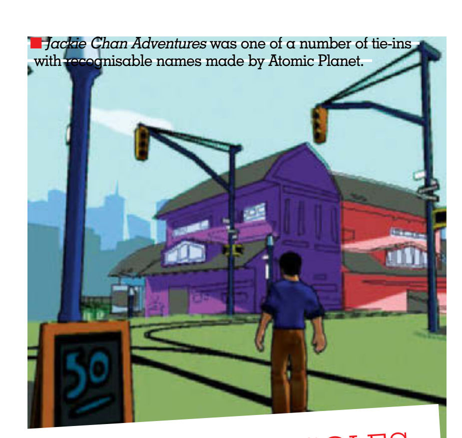
We soon realised that our art skills weren't good enough, plus we were too busy coding and designing the games, and so we advertised in the local computer shop, Chips, for an artist – we got introduced to a local guy called Adrian Ludley as a result. He became our first employee and this prompted us to move into a dedicated office in a business centre. Our first game for Codemasters was *SAS Combat Simulator*, which was released in 1989. It went to number one in the charts.

Did you remain hands-on as programmers?

I managed to keep doing it until around the mid-Nineties on various computers and consoles. The last games I programmed were on the SNES. After this came the PlayStation, which was biased towards 3D games and programmed in C. This coincided with having large teams to manage, so it seemed like a logical time to hang up my programming boots. Since then I have been managing multiple teams and projects in various studios, but I still get a buzz from the industry and have always remained heavily involved in the creativity and gameplay of any projects I have worked on.

The industry was certainly changing rapidly at this point. Was it hard to keep up?

Around the early Nineties, while developing our first console games for Codemasters on the NES, we starting visiting the US regularly for trade shows, and it quickly became apparent how huge the console industry was becoming, especially in the US. Our first employee, Adrian, had decided to emigrate to the US and he introduced us to the company he worked for,


Jackie Chan Adventures was one of a number of tie-ins with recognisable names made by Atomic Planet.

MOVING TO CONSOLES

"Developing for the Wii, DS, PS2 and Xbox held a lot of challenges. We had to develop our own cross-platform engines and tools. Each platform also had different challenges when trying to get platform holder approval, and the Nintendo Wii required a totally different approach."

Jason on moving to the next generation



As well as working on conversions, Jason Falcus also battled with code for original titles such as *SAS Combat Simulator*.



The Falcus' Atomic Planet created games for consoles including *Mike Tyson Heavyweight Boxing* for the PS2.



Jason Falcus was the producer of *Taito Legends* which brought many cool classics such as *Operation Wolf* to next-gen consoles.

Iguana Entertainment. They were looking for a UK base, and had some big projects lined up with US publishers.

Is that why you sold to Iguana Entertainment? Was it a good move for you?
Yes, we agreed to join them. It was an amazing experience because the first game we worked on was *NBA Jam*, which we developed in Teesside on three formats with a team of around ten. It went on to sell over 4.5 million copies and it was advertised on billboards everywhere.

Iguana was acquired by Acclaim and you managed Acclaim's Teeside studio. What did your role entail?
Following the success of *NBA Jam*, Acclaim bought Iguana US and UK and our studio later became known as Acclaim Studios. It was very exciting and a brilliant time to be involved in the industry. It was more enjoyable to work on these platforms because they contained hardware which was dedicated to producing fast-paced, arcade-style games and were ROM based, so no more loading from cassette or floppy disk.

Why did you leave and set up Atomic Planet?
We enjoyed our time with Acclaim and we worked with some amazing people. We built up a team of around 75 people in our studio, but Acclaim was going through some financial difficulties and it made redundancies. It seemed like a good time to break away.

I THINK THERE'S ALWAYS BEEN AN ELEMENT OF NOSTALGIA FOR OLD GAMES

Some of the games you made harked back to the early days. Were you aware that nostalgia for old games was surfacing?
Yeah, we had a good team of very strong old-school programmers at Atomic Planet who had a lot of experience working in assembler language on the old 8-bit computers and consoles, and this helped us win the contracts for those games. We were also working on some retro games on the early mobile phones at the time, such as *Defender Of The Crown* from Cinemaware. I think there's always been an element of nostalgia for old games, but it wasn't a conscious decision to go after those kinds of projects.

Where did things go wrong for Atomic Planet?
Atomic Planet worked primarily on work for hire projects and it had a big roster of international publisher and developer clients. But around the time of the recession in 2008, console projects got harder and harder to find and budgets got smaller and smaller. A few very large studios were getting all of the big contracts. The final nail in the coffin was when we had a dispute with a client over a large payment and we had no choice but to shut the studio down.

You now work at Kwalee with David Darling, who you worked with at Codemasters. What's it like being reunited with him?
It's fantastic to be working with David again, and working on free-to-play mobile games at Kwalee. We are working on something really unique and innovative, which I can't wait to show off soon.

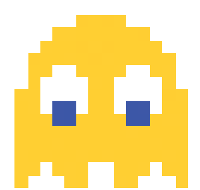
How do you feel things have changed over the period you've worked in the industry?
I have worked on free-to-play and mobile games for a few years now and I think the industry is the most exciting it has ever been. With relatively small teams it's possible to develop compelling games that can be a huge international success, thanks to digital distribution. There are a lot of challenges though. It isn't as simple as making a great game: developers need to be able to market, analyse, and constantly evolve their games as a live service. It is very difficult to do it properly without financial backing, and without a team that is willing to embrace this whole new way of thinking about games. Fortunately this is something we've got at Kwalee.



Jason Falcus was the operations director for *Broken Sword: Shadow Of The Templars – The Director's Cut* in 2009.



GAME CHANGERS
PAC-MAN



Released: May 22, 1980 (Japan) / October 1980 (WW) **Publisher:** Namco **Developer:** Namco (Japan) / Midway (WW) **System:** Arcade



Pac-Man cabinets had made more profit than the entire *Star Wars* trilogy by the end of the Eighties – with over $1 billion in quarters collected.

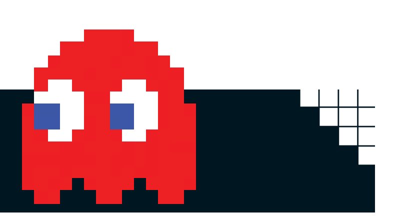
Pac-Man was gaming's first mascot, and the first game a *lot* of people played. It introduced many in the UK and the US to gaming as a form of entertainment, but what you might not know is it also did much more…

PAC-MAN IS NOT only synonymous with videogames as a medium, but was also one of the most popular iconic figures of the Eighties *as a decade*. That's how widespread this little yellow circle's influence has been: it wasn't just an experience limited to arcades and the relatively rare gaming enthusiast of the Eighties, no: *Pac-Man* was a social phenomenon… how many other videogames characters have also had a top ten single, an animated TV series and sold over $1 million worth of merchandise in the same financial year they were conceived? The answer is none… well, none other than this little yellow blob.

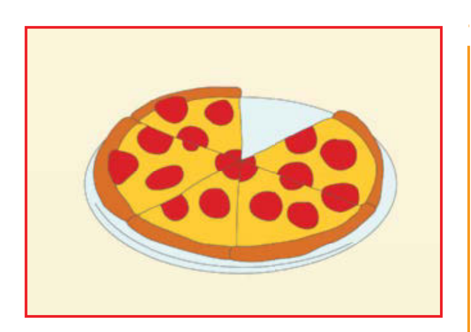
But *Pac-Man* wasn't this popular to begin with – in fact, the little puck-shaped pill-muncher didn't really make any waves in Japan when the cabinets were first shipped into arcades. It wouldn't be until five months later – when *Pac-Man* hit American shores – that *Pac-Man*'s reign of popularity would really begin. Arriving in the US in October 1980, it took only a couple of months for the game's simple yet addictive gameplay to infect arcades up and down the country, shifting over 400,000 units by 1982. Part of the success here was down to Midway – who distributed the game in the US – deciding to lower the game speed and difficulty of the game to appeal to a Western audience. This was clearly a successful move, because that's when *Pac-Man* took off.

Pac-Man, even in its day, was primitive: it didn't have the most incredible graphics you've ever seen, its chip-based music was one step above

THE ANATOMY OF PAC-MAN

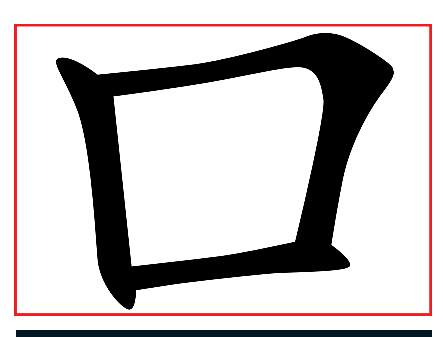


PAC-MAN MAY WELL BE GAMING'S MOST NOTABLE ICON… BUT WHAT INSPIRED THE CREATION OF THAT LITTLE YELLOW CIRCLE ALL THOSE YEARS AGO?



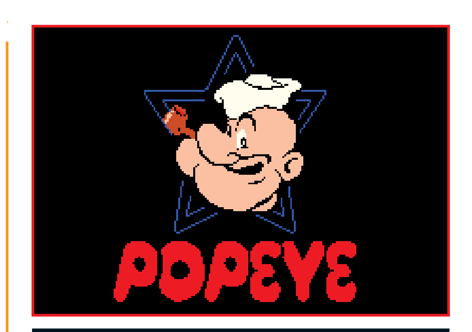
PIZZA

★ Iwatani has famously stated that *Pac-Man*'s shape was inspired by a pizza missing a slice… but that's only half true as something else was also involved…



JAPANESE LANGUAGE

★ The rest of the story is that *Pac-Man* was initially inspired by Iwatani simplifying and rounding off the Japanese symbol for mouth: 'kuchi'.



POPEYE

★ Toru Iwatani confirmed that the idea of eating things to make *Pac-Man* strong came to him directly after watching *Popeye* cartoons during development.

irritating, and it lacked a story (other arcade games were picking up their narratives). Yet, because of its maze gameplay and its accessibility, it exploded into the minds of a generation: it totally changed the way videogames were perceived by the masses – it brought the medium into full view (and therefore appreciation) of a mass market.

Pac-Man was family-friendly, too: the mascot gaming needed to encourage more people to get involved with electronic play. There were no guns, no blood, no silliness – just a yellow circle, some collectibles and some ghosts. It broke through social and gender boundaries and put gaming on the right track to becoming a socially acceptable form of entertainment – not just a niche hobbyist pursuit. That was creator Toru Iwatani's intention, too: he wanted to attract women to the arcade because he noted there was a lack of a female presence there, and he wanted games to be enjoyed by everyone, not just teenage boys.

The only other game to achieve an even similar level of cultural intrusion at this point was *Space Invaders* – but even the appeal of the Atari classic was dwarfed by how widespread *Pac-Man* became. There was a trick to this: *Pac-Man* hit upon something latent in people's minds, something that took advantage of a person's desire not to be beaten: it was the perfect arcade game. It was the beginning of the 'just one more go' mentality, and even though it was on a pay-per-play machine, *Pac-Man* successfully continued to draw customers. Irrespective of the technology you ship on, a game that can consistently keep you playing like that is going to continually draw new players.

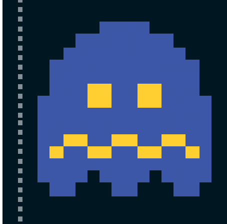
THE MASCOT GAMING NEEDED TO ENCOURAGE MORE PEOPLE TO GET INVOLVED WITH ELECTRONIC PLAY

KEY FACTS

■ The original *Pac-Man* arcade game was written in only 24kb of data – smaller than a thumbnail JPEG

■ *Pac-Man* was originally called *Puck-Man* in Japan, but Midway changed that in the US due to fears of 'obscenity'

■ *Pac-Man* took one year (1979) to make, and only used the expertise of a nine-man team under direction from Toru Iwatani



■■■ The surprising thing about *Pac-Man* is that, despite the icon's name being plastered all over the machines and even etymologically linked to the actual term for *Pac-Man* obsession (Pac-Mania), he wasn't really the star of the show. The reason the game endured was because of the seemingly random nature of the ghosts that acted as your antagonists: Inky, Blinky, Pinky and, um, Clyde. Each ghost had independent behaviour that – in a sense – even gave them pseudo-personalities. In Japanese, in fact, the characters were named after their AI traits – Chaser, Ambusher, Fickle, and (our personal favourite) Feigning Ignorance, sometimes translated as Stupid.

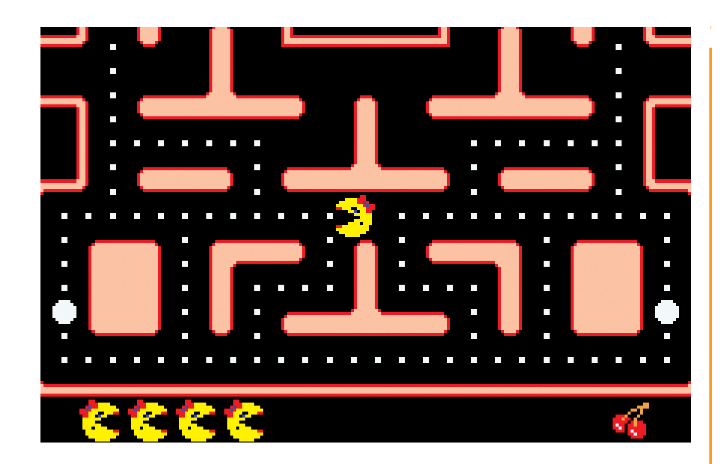
Two years after its release, roughly 2 billion coins had been passed through *Pac-Man* machines, and *Pac-Man* merchandise in the US had exceeded $1 billion in profits. There were an estimated 30 million active players of the game across the US, too – games even nowadays struggle to hit those numbers worldwide. So between establishing the maze game genre, demonstrating the power of a 'character' in videogames, becoming gaming's first mascot and even actively welcoming women into the traditionally male-dominated arcades, it's safe to say that *Pac-Man* is possibly one of the most influential games of all time.



GAME CHANGERS

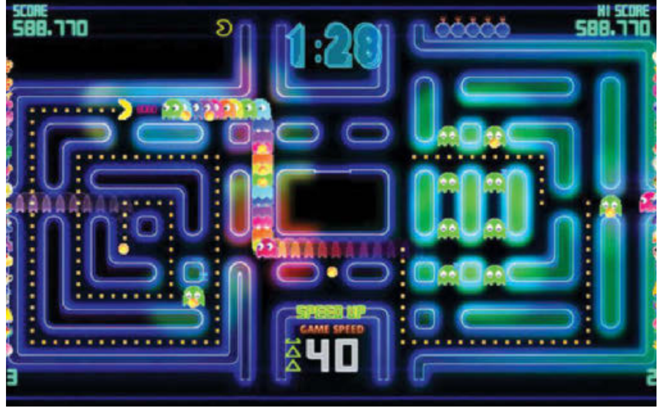
THE 8 BEST PAC-MAN SPIN-OFFS

PAC-MAN WAS NOT ONLY THE FIRST GREAT GAMING ICON, BUT ALSO THE FIRST CHARACTER TO BE UNCEREMONIOUSLY MILKED FOR ALL IT WAS WORTH… MOST WERE DISASTROUS, BUT HERE ARE THE EIGHT BEST PAC-MAN EXPERIMENTS



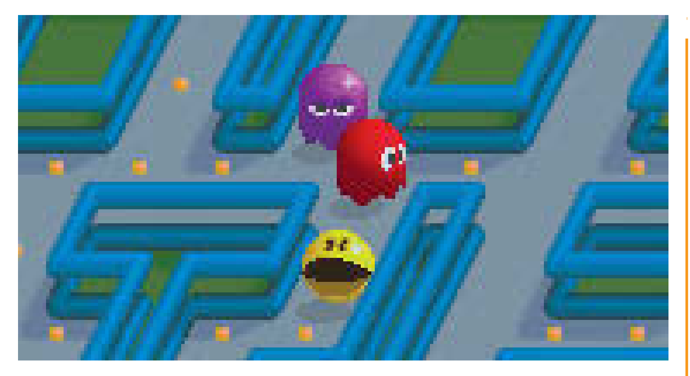
MS. PAC-MAN (1981)

■ JUST ONE YEAR after *Pac-Man*'s release, an unofficial 'kit' for it was made by General Computer Corporation called *Crazy Otto*. The studio showed its game to Midway, and the publisher commissioned it, changing the sprites to make them more like *Pac-Man*. Midway didn't actually own the rights to *Pac-Man* though.



PAC-MAN CHAMPIONSHIP EDITION (2007)

■ THE GAME THAT attracted Toru Iwatani back to Namco to create another *Pac-Man* – it's a much faster version of the game everybody knows, and alters the maze slightly so it has two distinct halves. It was designed around high-score chasing.



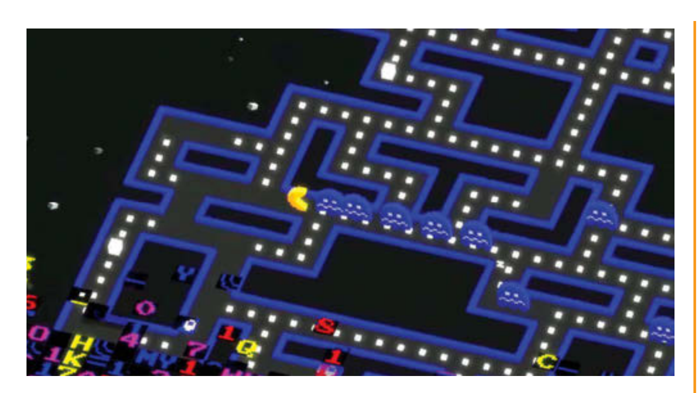
PAC-MANIA (1987)

THIS WAS THE first real sidestep the series took from the top-down maze genre. As with many games of the time, *Pac-Mania* opted for an isometric angle and introduced two new ghosts to make things more complicated. Pac-Man also gained the ability to jump, made more interesting when the two new enemies learn to jump too.



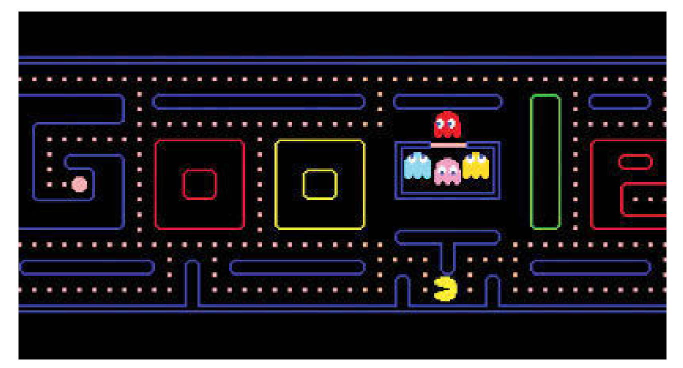
PAC-MAN BATTLE ROYALE (2011)

DEBUTING IN ARCADES and hitting iOS and Android shortly after, *Battle Royale* was designed to commemorate the series' 30th anniversary – while this could have been (another) cynical cash-in, it actually proved to be one of the better ideas in the series. The four-player PvP in the game was frantic.



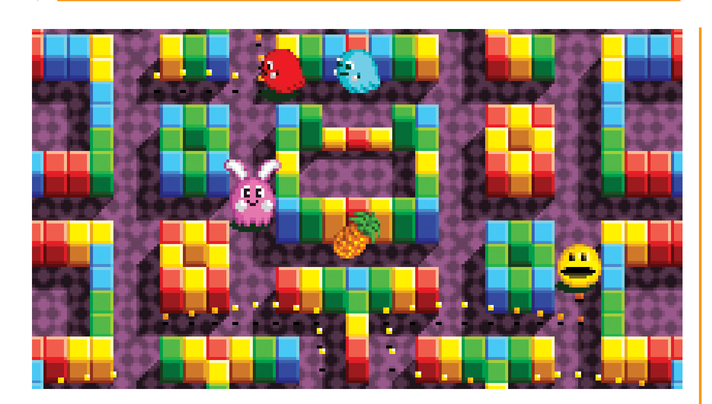
PAC-MAN 256 (2015)

WEIRDLY, THIS IS a game based on a glitch – the original *Pac-Man* game would go 'split-screen' when you completed level 255 (caused by the 8-bit processers being unable to deal with a number greater than 255). This game uses that glitch effect to chew up the stage as you go, turning it into an endless runner.



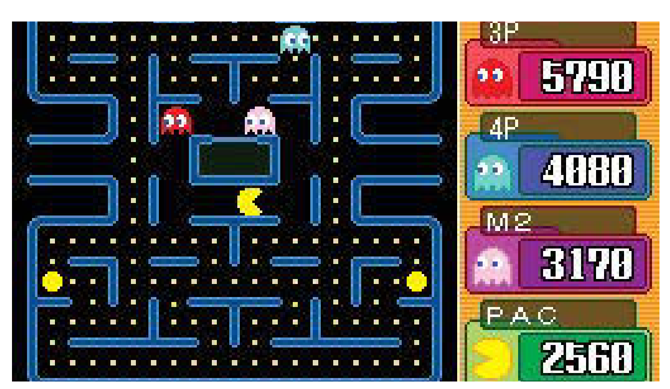
GOOGLE'S PAC-MAN BANNER (2010)

FOR THE 30TH ANNIVERSARY of *Pac-Man*, Google famously changed its homepage into a playable version of *Pac-Man*, the letters forming the maze blocks of the level. The game had a secret bonus too: you could do two-player with Ms. Pac-Man if you threw in another coin! That's a dedicated doodle.



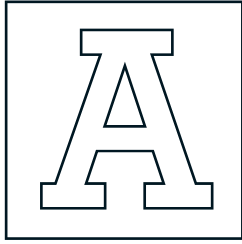
PAC-MAN ARRANGEMENT (1996)

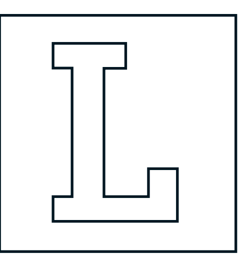
THIS WAS ACTUALLY Pac-Man's first return to the arcade in nine years. As with most *Pac-Man* reboots, this one introduced a new ghost too, but this one was a little… different. Called Kinky, this ghost would combine with others to grant them new powers and forms. Pac-Man himself also gained the ability to speed boost.



PAC-MAN VS. (2003)

THIS INTRIGUING LITTLE game was created by none other than Shigeru Miyamoto – of *Mario* fame – and was a multiplayer title designed to take full advantage of the GameBoy Advance's system link cable. The GBA player would control Pac-Man, and then four other players on the GameCube could control the ghosts.

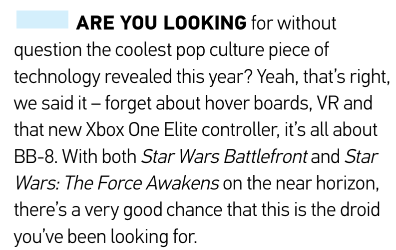






THE VAULT

STAR WARS: THE FORCE AWAKENS BB-8 SPHERO DROID

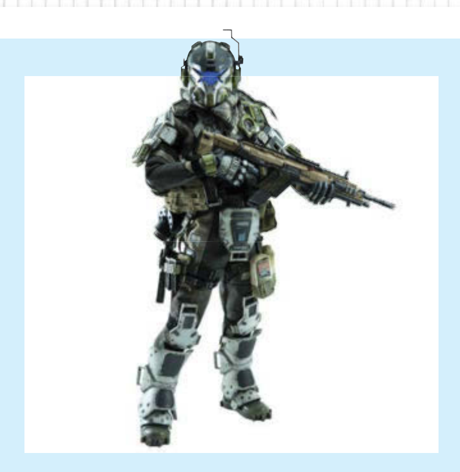
MANUFACTURER: **SPHERO** PRICE: **£149.99**



ARE YOU LOOKING for without question the coolest pop culture piece of technology revealed this year? Yeah, that's right, we said it – forget about hover boards, VR and that new Xbox One Elite controller, it's all about BB-8. With both *Star Wars Battlefront* and *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* on the near horizon, there's a very good chance that this is the droid you've been looking for.

Designed by Sphero, BB-8 is an app-controlled droid authentic to JJ Abrams' most recent creation, letting you bring a part of *Star Wars* into your own home. With the Android or iOS companion app, you'll be able to take control of BB-8; it'll drive around your home, terrorise your dogs and, perhaps best of all, even respond to voice commands. Setting it to patrol, it'll make sure you aren't disturbed while you are trying to kick ass on *Call Of Duty: Black Ops III* and, should you have the inclination to be awesome, you'll even be able to create and view holographic recordings.

Sphero's offering might be a little smaller than Hasbro's similar device, but the functionality is much better than the officially-licensed remote-controlled bot. If you're a *Star Wars* fan, this is a must have – unless BB-8 turns out to be the new Jar Jar Binks, in which case we apologise for bringing this cool piece of tech to your attention.



TITANFALL IMC PILOT ACTION FIGURE

Better late than ever, this 12-inch tall IMC figurine is finally going to be made available and it's looking great. Features 20 points of articulation and light-up red/blue helmets.

www.jinx.com



MONOPOLY: FALLOUT COLLECTOR'S EDITION

There have been plenty of *Monopoly* editions released over the years, but this is the only one we would crawl out of a vault and into the apocalypse to get our hands on – it's gorgeous.

www.store.bethsoft.com



HALO 5: GUARDIANS SPARTAN LOCKE BACKPACK

There's a chance Spartan Locke might become the new hero of *Halo*, so get in on the support early by walking about town with this rather slick Fireteam Osiris-themed backpack.

www.gamer-heaven.net

GAMING CLOTHING



ANTI-GRAVITY RACING LEAGUE

Okay, it's officially over. Insert Coin now has a line of clothing based on *WipEout*, and it's pretty damn great. This retro-styled sweater is a must-have for those that miss the furiously fast racer.
www.insertcoinclothing.com



GALAHAD'S BARBERSHOP

Fan of bad games but like cool T-shirts? You may want to like this line based on *The Order: 1886*. On the plus side, you can wear it for more than five hours before being done with it.
www.insertcoinclothing.com



ASSASSIN'S CREED: SYNDICATE TOP HAT

Another year, another wave of *AC*-branded merchandise. Only this year, it comes with a little Victorian style, which is always welcomed. This top hat is perfect for cosplay, though be warned, it doesn't collapse.
www.merchoid.com

ORBITSOUND A70 SOUNDBAR



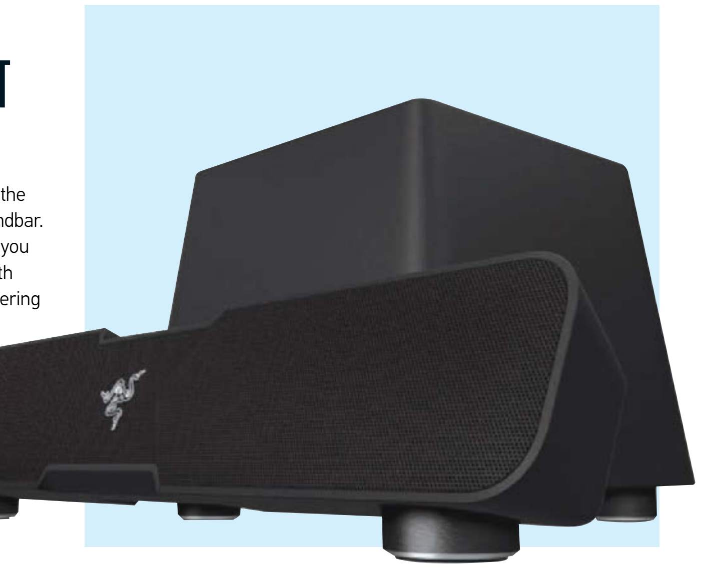
SOLD BY: **ORBITSOUND** PRICE: **£499.99**

IF YOU'RE LOOKING for the ultimate living room audio solution – without having to run cables all across your floor – then OrbitSounds' latest soundbar is the way to go. It'll connect to your Xbox One/PS4 via an optical input and dominate with thumping bass and a strong, striking balance between the mids and highs. Basically, games with incredible sound design, such as *Halo 5: Guardians* and *Call Of Duty: Black Ops III*, will make it sound like modern warfare has arrived in your front room.
www.orbitsound.com

RAZER LEVIATHAN

SOLD BY: **RAZER** PRICE: **£169.99**

IF YOU ARE operating on a budget, the Leviathan from Razer is a very versatile soundbar. Connecting to your console via optical, it lets you experience simulated 5.1 surround sound with your videogames and movies, while even offering Bluetooth support for those of you who want some volume from your music. A great device let down by the lack of remote, meaning you need to get up every time you want to turn it up/down or change input channel, which is a pain.
www.razerzone.com



POLK N1 SOUNDBAR

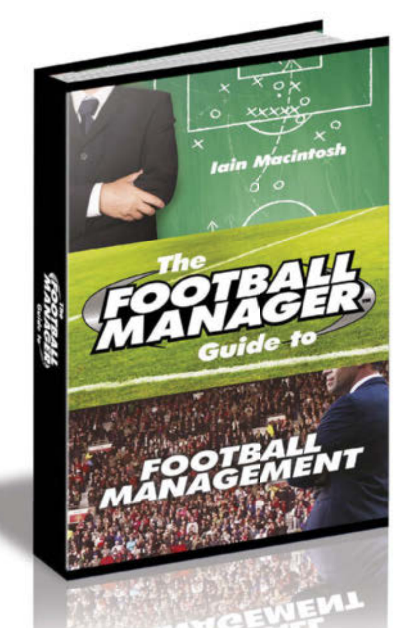
SOLD BY: **POLK** PRICE: **£110.00**

THIS 39-INCH SOUNDBAR is an absolute beast, dominating all available space underneath your TV, but believe us when we say it's worth it. Not only is it equipped to integrate into your existing setup effortlessly, it comes engineered with gaming in mind, offering built-in gaming EQs to help you finetune the device to whatever game you're playing. Hear the bullets fly in *Battlefield*, engines roar in *Forza* and the crowd cheer in *FIFA* like never before.
www.polkaudio.com



THE FOOTBALL MANAGER GUIDE TO FOOTBALL MANAGEMENT

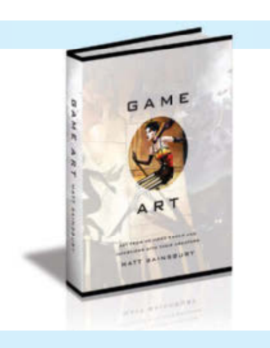
PUBLISHER: **CENTURY**



BACK IN 2014, it was announced that *Football Manager* – the popular, friendship-ruining and time-sink game for PC – would be employed by clubs all around the world to help scout for new and aspiring players, so accurate is the simulation to real life. It is possible to make the reasonable assumption then, that *Football Manager* players often feel that they are more than capable and equipped to take the skills they have learned from the many thousands of hours they have sunk into its virtual spreadsheets to manage their own real club. That's where *The Football Manager Guide To Football Management* comes in.

Written by football writer Iain Macintosh (co-author of 2012's *Football Manager Stole My Life*), it's designed for those that spend far too much time thinking about their *FM* careers. It's full of fun anecdotes and real-life managerial drops of wisdom that you can take back to your burgeoning videogame career, and hey, who knows, maybe some of what you learn will even spill over into your daily routine. When it comes to management, dealing with corporate or just trying to balance the books at the office, *Football Manager* is a fun and interesting way to learn the skills while surrounding yourself with the sport of overpaid kings. Covering everything from tactics, scouting, dealing with the media and transfers, become a better *FM* player by learning from the pros – they have suffered so you don't have to.





GAME ART

If you've ever found yourself wasting hours admiring video game concept art online, you'll need to check this out. *Game Art* collects artwork from 40 videogames and interviews with their creators. Featuring work from major studios, such as Square Enix and BioWare, it's a great peak behind the scenes.

www.nostarch.com/gameart



FALLOUT 4 VAULT DWELLER'S SURVIVAL GUIDE

We don't usually like to recommend game guides, but Prima has knocked it out of the park. This guide will not only look great on your shelf, but it'll help you navigate the wastelands of Boston better than ever.

www.store.bethsoft.com



HALO: ESCALATION VOLUME 3 TPB

Want to get ready for *Halo 5: Guardians*, know all the details on Blue Team and be up to date with the story before it all kicks off? *Halo: Escalation*'s third volume will deliver the info, as well as hinting towards the origins of Fireteam Osiris' two new characters.

www.darkhorse.com



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